Donald J. Dean, Liberator, 1/26/1987

Interview conducted by Rhoda Lewin for the Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League of Minnesota and the Dakotas

Q: This is Rhoda Lewin interviewing Donald Dean in Willmar, MN, for the Holocaust Oral History Project for the Jewish Community Relations Council Anti-Defamation League. Mr. Dean, could you start out by telling me where you were born, where you’ve lived, what your education is?

A: I was born in the little town of Ashby, Minnesota – not in it, it was a farm outside of Ashby – in 1911, which was quite a long time ago. And went to the high school and that’s as far as I went through school. Then went to the big city, Minneapolis, to seek my fortune, with my mother and my sister.

Q: Where is Ashby?

A: Ashby’s near Fergus Falls; just southeast of Fergus Falls about twenty miles.

Q: And so you came to Minneapolis to make your fame and fortune. That must have been about 192….

A: ’29.

Q: Just as the Depression hit.

A: Yeah, we was just going into it. I worked at different jobs, automotive, primarily. I worked for automotive wholesale jobbers, and traveled on the road for about twenty years for one of the major automotive manufacturers out of St. Louis. In ’42 everybody started waving the flag, and so my brother-in-law and myself, one day got real patriotic and we said, “Let’s enlist,” so we enlisted. Well, he wound up as a major in the quartermaster corps, and never went overseas, and I was a private in the ordnance, and worked my way up from there. (Laughs)

Q: And so you got shipped out to the European theatre, when?

A: I think it was about ’44 when we landed in England. I had quite a trip over. I told my wife I had a lot of interesting experiences. I went overseas with Winston Churchill. (Laughs) We were on board the same ship, which was the Queen Mary. I only saw him once.

Q: You mean as a private in the US Army, you sailed to England on the Queen Mary?

A: Yeah. (Laughs) Well, I wasn’t a private then, I was actually a warrant officer. But it was converted to a troop ship, of course, and he and his entourage were in the States, and we didn’t know anything about it at the time, but we got out to sea and it was announced that he was on board. He and his party, about 150 in his party, they took up a whole deck. We saw him only once. They showed a moving picture in the big theatre on the ship and he came down with his party and sat in the front row, and then as he left, he had his two fingers up, the victory sign, and had his big cigar.

We landed in Scotland. That was the only place that these big ships could go in. They took it into Glasgow and at night down the island to Southhampton. The next day we boarded some ships and went over to France and went over the side, into some LST’s and up on shore, in the sand. There was no combat then. It had been declared a “communication zone,” so there was no shooting, at that time.

We had all of our vehicles, and everything. Our orders were to go down to southern France. There was a pocket of Germans there, that were surrounded, and were just holding out, and to kind of get us accustomed to the warfare part of it, we were supposed to go down and clean that out. Well, in the middle of the night, we were moving along and all of a sudden we were stopped and had orders to turn around, which we did, the whole division, and went into the Battle of the Bulge. That’s when we started shooting.

Q: Now, just for these 1980s people who are listening to this, tell me, what was ordnance?

A: Ordnance deals with weaponry, ammunition, and the vehicles, and maintenance, and so on. I was in the vehicular part of it. In our battalion we repaired the tanks that were damaged, and shot up, or were disabled, all vehicles, all the weapons, the sighting devices for the field artillery. That’s what ordnance consists of.

In our battalion, certain men were in charge of the ammunition, and drawing it, and so on. I was in the replacement parts. I had another fellow with me, Bennett Gordon, from Des Moines. We controlled all the parts and repair parts that went into all the vehicles: the engines, axles, transmissions, front drives. Had quite a big operation. It was just like a parts department on wheels. We had around forty trucks that were loaded with replacement parts, and we went into combat with all those things.

Q: Now, you fought through the Battle of the Bulge. And then what happened, after that? You moved on out?

A: We kept moving and we were close to Dusseldorf and several cities. We wound up bypassing Koblenz, wound up at Linz, Austria, on the Danube River. And we were in that town across the river from Linz – I don’t remember the name of that town – and word came that there was a concentration camp about fifteen miles south, on the east side of the river. So, this Bennett Gordon and myself, we took our jeep, and drove down there. This was not a duty. We weren’t actually liberating the place. We did some work in there, but as we come up closer to the camp, there would be groups of civilian people – we didn’t know anything about them at that time – they were inmates of the camp.

Q: Now, this fellows name was Gordon. There are a lot of Jewish people named Gordon. This was a Jewish friend of yours in the army, and he was going with you?

A: Yep. Bennett Gordon, he was a Jewish person. He was my superior officer.

Q: And you had heard that his was a concentration camp, and so you were going to….

A: We knew it was there; work came out. So these people we were meeting, staggering around there, they were actually inmates of the camp. And when it was actually liberated – I think it was the day before – they rushed to the gate, those that could walk, and they got out into the Fatherland, there. They’d go across the road, and it was a nice warm day, and by the time they got across the road they were exhausted, so they would lie down and sleep, and rest. The stronger ones went down the road both ways from the camp, and they would go until their strength gave out and then they’d go off on the side, in the grass, and lie there. And that’s what these people were doing. We’d see them lying there.

Q: This was in April, or May?

A: Probably May.

Q: Describe what they looked like.

A: Well, most people had some clothes. Most of them had the striped uniforms, wide stripes, blue and kind of white.

Q: And I suppose they were dirty and worn.

A: Oh, yes. They were dirty, and unshaven. We kept on going and finally got to the front of the place, and we drove in the big arch, and I have a picture of that. We got inside and we started walking around and we could see these emaciated people, and the farther into the camp we got, well, it was really pretty gruesome. But a pretty well-dressed man came in, came up to us, who was a Russian. I’ve got a picture of him here, if I can put my hands on it. Now there was the front of the camp, and that’s the gate we went into.

Q: We have a stone wall, like stucco, and inside you can see the barracks.

A: This is the fellow that confronted us. This is the Russian fellow, and he offered to take us around. He speaks some pretty good English. This little guy here was a Polack, and he had a little machine gun there and he was having the biggest time in the world, ‘cause he was running around the country, shooting things up. And what they did is they’d find these people that worked in the camp, these SS troopers, and they’d kill them right then and there.

And this is more of what the camp looked like. Some of the people had some clothes. And so this Russian fellow, he says, “If you want me to take you guys around, I can tell you more about it.” And he did. And as we toured around, these are some of the sights that we saw. Pictures of all the bodies. Maybe you’ve seen a lot of these things anyway.

Q: Yeah, but every time you see them it’s a new experience. All these people, they were just like skeletons, they were starved to death. They had all these bodies just in piles and here’s a cart, two carts full of bodies. How were they disposing of them?

A: I’ll get to that. Well, here’s a picture of these people across the road, that I told you about. Here’s a Jewish fellow. He had a stripe down the top, through his hair. They would do that so in case they did escape, they could easily be identified. They clipped it right down to the scalp.

Q: And of course he’s just skeletal.

A: Here’s one more, the people going down the road. So we’re kind of jumping around here a little bit.

Q: It’s a beautiful tree-lined country road. Now, were these all men, or were there both men and women?

A: I’ll show you something about that. This Jewish fellow that I told you about, we talked to him quite a little bit.

Q: Did you speak German?

A: No, he spoke English. I made the mistake there of pulling out a package of cigarettes, and I was practically mobbed. These ones that could walk, such as these right here, they smelled that smoke and saw the cigarettes and I gave them the pack and I didn’t pull another pack because I think they probably would’ve killed me to get a cigarette.

Q: It doesn’t look like they were strong enough to do that.

A: No, it doesn’t. Now here are some of the piles of bodies that you were asking about. Now, let me get these in sequence here. You can’t see them, but they were loading them up in wheelbarrows, and this was a big ditch, a mass grave, and they’d take one end, and the other end. These first, maybe a half a dozen or so, or a dozen [bodies], were women. And that pile right there – these pictures here – this was taken by that grave and right in there is where this pile is, and the commanding officer of our unit there issued a proclamation that the civilians in this town of Mauthausen and another town of Geissen would work in there and dispose of the bodies. They’d pick them up, quite ceremoniously, two arms, two legs, lay ‘em on a wheelbarrow, push ‘em up, and lie ‘em down in the graves.

Q: They’re put so nearly, in a row.

A: I suppose that the bulldozer come along out and just filled it up.

Q: Yeah, because in the foreground you can see they’re already partially covered. So then the commanding officer had gone into the towns, and just commanded these….

A: Yeah. And the people professed they didn’t know anything about this. But of course the odor…Now in between these two windows is the crematorium. As you fact the over, off to the right there was a big door that looked like the big door on a walk-in cooler, with that handle like they have on a cooler. And you opened that up and in there was a room, probably 20 by 20. The floor level was about three foot down below the level we were at, and there were steps going down. In the ceiling were shower heads, which actually were gas heads. And this room was completely full of bodies, corpses, right up level with us, three foot deep. The stench was terrible. They’d haul them from there, after they’d kill them. The Russian fellow said the screaming and hollering was terrible, but it didn’t last long because the gas would put them away pretty fast. And they’d haul them out of there and put them into the ovens, and cremate them.

Q: You say you went into Mauthausen, how long after it was liberated? The next day?

A: Probably it was the day after.

Q: And the ovens were still warm?

A: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Q: Full of ashes?

A: Partly. There’s an outline there – it looks like it could be a skull. I don’t know if it is or not. These are some of the local workmen, working on that mass grave.

Q: There they are, in their vests and their Fedora hats, the Germans from town out there helping buy these people. And the news article you’re showing me is “Twenty-six more death camp killers named in Germany.” It’s from Landsburg, and it says, “Mauthausen concentration camp officials and doctors hanged by the U.S. Army.” They’re being tried, and convicted, for murders and tortures at Mauthausen.

A: One fellow worked in this little area, where they hung them and they shot them. You see this wall, where the bullets were. They’d stand them up and shoot ‘em. The guy who worked here was lying down along the edge over here, with a rake through his skill. He’d gotten out. The people that worked in here, they’d put on civilian clothes, and gone out in the countryside. Well, these people were searching around and they found this guy and they dragged him back in here and they put him away. My partner Ben took this picture of me.

Q: This was one of the German concentration camp guards.

A: That’s just me walking down there. That path I’m walking on is a gravel path and right alongside of it is a blacktop path. If they stepped from this path over into here, or towards the fence, they’d immediately shoot them. This is all high voltage.

Q: Barbed wire. Electrified wire fence?

A: Yeah, and this fellow here, got across there, and got in and was electrocuted and fell down, I suppose. I imagine that’s what happened. There’s another one down below there, see?

Q: Did you have the feeling that they knew you were coming, that they were trying to clean up everything before you came?

A: Oh, yeah. They were trying to get rid of those bodies, but they couldn’t do it. That’s why – this fellow told us – why they’re all messed around here, scattered all over. They were trying to get them disposed of before the Allies came in. But this is one or two sheets that I took out of the files in the office.

Q: Oh, they kept beautiful files.

A: You don’t know how beautiful.

Q: Very detailed. Let’s see, there’s the prisoner’s last name.

A: First is nationality.

Q: Nationality. Italian. Serbian. Polish. French. Yugoslavian. The initial’s in front of the name. And that’s his last name. And his first name. And the date of birth.

A: Date of birth. And his serial number, which was tattooed into his wrist. You’ve seen that, probably. And supposedly the time he died. And there it tells you, May 3rd, 21,288 to that day.

Q: they kept a running total of how many people had died.

A: And how accurate was that? Nobody knows, you know.

Q: And you imagine somebody was sitting there in the office of the concentration camp, typing those lists, every day.

A: These are the pictures of some of the grounds. They maybe don’t tell you an awful lot, and I don’t know why I even took ‘em. I was taking pictures and Bennett was taking pictures.

Q: Can you describe how you felt about what you were seeing? And then how he felt? What he said? Do you think you looked at it differently because you had this Jewish person with you?

A: Oh, no, that had nothing to do with it. We were good friends. Most all my good friends in the army were Jews. When I worked in Minneapolis, all my good customers were Jews. Wilenskys, Rappaports, and so on. It seemed like I got along with Jewish people. No, that had nothing to do with it. We were accustomed to seeing death. When we crossed the Rhine, I remember that day, which was kind of a trying day. My driver and I, we drive along and we got across the river on an engineering bridge – it was a temporary bridge – and we were driving along and I said to him, “Petty,” I says, “I haven’t seen any dead Germans around.” “No,” he says, “I noticed that.” (Laughs) Well, when you saw the dead Germans around then you felt comfortable because you knew that our troops had gone through there.

So we drove along and pretty soon, by golly, there’s a couple of ‘em laying in a ditch, dead. Well, we felt better. This was a horrible thing to witness, but our reaction to it was, well, “tough, you know, they’re no good.” But you wondered how anybody could do it. And then the stories that they told us. This Russian fellow, they caught him eating a raw potato he’d stolen out of the kitchen, so they took him to a shop area where he supposedly worked. And there was like a footstool about so high, and up above that was an eyebolt coming out of the ceiling.

He ways they stood him up on that stool, took a rope and put it through the eyebolt in the ceiling, had his hands behind him, tied, and they fastened this rope tight to his hands and they kicked the stool out from under him. He says, “There I hung,,” he says, “and boy, it was pretty painful.” I don’t know how long it was, but they finally cut him down. But I guess you even become accustomed to that kind of stuff. When we finally went back to our quarters in Linz where we were, we all had quite an odor from this thing, and we bathed, and we bathed, and finally we burned our clothes, disposed of them completely, and we still had the odor. It was in our hair.

Q: You can’t describe the odor?

A: Well, have you ever smelled a Turkish cigarette?

Q: Not for a long time.

A: Well, I say it because we were in that office there, and they had some cigarettes and this one fellow was smoking and I used to just love the odor from it, from a Turkish cigarette, and I can’t smoke one now. I really enjoyed smoking one, but somehow I connected the odor of a Turkish cigarette to that camp. Not that it probably smells like the camp, but is I should get a whiff of one of those things, I think right away about that lousy camp.

Q: The smell of things rotting.

A: Yeah. Dirty feet. (Laughs)

Q: The prisoners must have been awfully happy to see you.

A: Sure! You bet! These people, like the ones that you saw standing there and the fellow we talked to. The Red Cross came in pretty fast afterwards, and they had to be very careful feeding ‘em, because all they could them would be just a little bowl of soup. Some of them over-ate and got violently sick, and I guess some of them died because of it. The food was a shock to their system.

But those that could walk and could move around, they got to start with just a bowl of soup, and they were put into a kind of hospital, and rested up. I don’t know what all happened to them after that. But it was pathetic to see those people. This Jewish fellow, we asked him, “Well, what do you want to do?” And what he wanted to do, was, he wanted to go to Jerusalem. I don’t remember what country he was from, if he was from Germany or Poland or where, but they shipped a lot of people around to these different camps from different countries that they had taken over.

Q: How long did you stay in the camp?

A: One day.

Q: So you weren’t really aware of how many of the people were continuing to die.

A: No. We didn’t want to go back, either. One day was enough.

Q: And did you have any feeling for how many of these people were Jews and how many of them were not Jews?

A: No. According to this thing here, there really weren’t so many Jewish people. Now maybe they were Polish Jews, maybe they were all Jewish, from Italy or from Poland or Russia or wherever. There’s a lot of Poles here, quite a few Poles, and there’s two Italians.

Q: I think on the record Mauthausen had prisoners of war, too, and so you would get other nationalities. Can you think back and remember – I know you’ve seen it on the pictures – can you walk through the camp? Tell me how many buildings there were, and how big they were, and what they were for?

A: That building there was the only one that appeared to be in good shape. Some of these are made of stone, and that’s what this camp did, they made these stones for bridge building, and so on.

Q: You say the “made” the stones. Did they have a quarry?

A: There was a quarry there, and all those stones there were made in that camp. This Russian fellow said that they made these people lift those stones up onto little saw-horses – you know what a saw-horse is, they were about so high – they lifted the stones up, and stood with hammers and chisel, and shaped ‘em.

Q: Into nice rectangular building blocks. So then they built the wall, and they built the buildings.

A: They used these stones for bridge building, highway work, and so on.

Q: Did you go inside the buildings?

A: Yeah. In one place, it was just the most gruesome thing. It looked like they’d taken bunk beds, about three bunk beds, three high, and pushed them all together so they actually were shelves, and it was dark in there and wet, maybe from human urine, and the people in there were crawling around, and they were snarling. Maybe that isn’t the right word, but they were insane, and they were in such misery, and crawling around like a bunch of animals. That was the worst thing we saw. It really was the worst, because these were people that were alive, and I would presume they were insane.

Q: They had been so mistreated. You said the Red Cross came in. The army medics, then, were not involved?

A: Well, I’m sure they were. I’m sure that they came in there, to take care of these people that were still alive, that they could save.

Q: When you look back on this, do you think about how people could do this? What do you make of all this when you think about it?

A: Well, I don’t know.

Q: When they had the program at the high school, you came in with Bill Borth, and said you had witnessed this.

A: Yeah. Were you there?

Q: No. I heard about it. I wish I had been. But was this the first time you had talked about this?

A: In the public area. You’re the second time. The local Golden Kiwanis – they’re the old, retired people, they meet once a week – one fellow asked me after he saw this thing if I’d talk to them, and I ran the slides and everything. Do you know Fred Baron?

Q: Yes.

A: He gave a very interesting talk. He was in the camps. Another fellow – Rafowitz – he has a cap and hat manufacturing plant on First Avenue North [in Minneapolis] – he called on me. I was in business here, and he called on me one day. He sold caps, manufactured caps, an interesting guy. And he had the tattoo, the serial number, on his arm. And I saw this thing. We talked and talked. Quite broken, very, very Yiddish. “Sam,” I says, “What camp?” And he looks at me kind of funny (laughs). He’s a great little guy. And he come over here, he and his wife and another Jewish fellow and his wife, they manufactured caps in the old country and he started making caps. And he went up to Dayton’s and he made a bid on the caps and he got the bid from Dayton’s, hundreds of caps. We bought a lot of caps from him. So he got the bid, and he didn’t have any money. (Laughs)

Q: Oh, to get the materials to make the caps.

A: So he goes to Northwestern National Bank across the street, that’s burned down now, and he says there was an old fellow there. Now this wasn’t this particular day that we talked about it. We talked quite frequently about it when he called on me, you see. But this is one of his experiences. He says, “I looked over these loan officers, and there was one old fellow sitting there, I’ll give him a try.” So he told him the story and he showed him the orders from Dayton’s, which was collateral, you see. And the old fellow, I think, gave him $8,000. And he bought the material. And Singer sewing machines, they would lend him the machines.

“Well,” he said, “my wife, and” – I forget his name, the other fellow – “Hymie, and his wife, the four of us were in this little room,” he says, “that had one light, the bulb coming down, and the women would cook and we sewed night and day. And,” he says, “we made all the caps. And I loaded ‘em up in the car and took ‘em over to Dayton’s.” He put them on the passenger elevator, boxes of them, cartons of ‘em caps, put them on the passenger elevator, and took them up to the office where this fellow was, this buyer was, that he got the order from. Hauled them down, and put them in the hallway.

Alongside this – he’s laughing as he tells me about this – he says, “I went into the office, and well, I says, ‘Your caps are ready.” “Well, where are they?” “Right outside the door.” “No. you should have taken them to the warehouse.” And he laughed, but he said, “I didn’t know.” So then they laughed about it and then he got the check for it. Then he went right over to the bank and paid this old fellow, and he says the old guy kind of smiled. “Sam,” he says, “ you want to borrow some more money?” Sam says, “No.” “Well, why not?” “I got money.” (Laughs)

Q: Oh, so he was in business.

A: Funny you haven’t met him, because he is very successful. He just went right up to the top. And this fellow Fred Baron, the same way. I asked him, what prompts this, he came over here stone broke, can’t even speak the language, you see, and our own people laying right here hollering and begging the government for help, and getting relief, and Jewish people come over, and can’t even talk the language, and in a couple of years they’re successful.

Q: Well, I think it was the very strong, very resourceful, very lucky ones who survived. And those are the ones who came over. The ones who would not have been hard workers and brave and adventurous --- they were the ones who usually didn’t survive. But it’s something to think about, how these people could do this. Did you try to talk about it after the war to the people here? People in the Twin Cities, people that you knew?

A: No, I never. But I’ve showed the pictures to quite a lot of people, and they’re amazed; they can’t understand how anybody could do such a thing like this, you know, and you can’t understand it and neither can I. Why would this guy take off and try to experiment on a whole race?

Q: But it’s interesting, though, that forty years passed before people really started saying, “Tell me about it,” so now when they ask you, you think back. Do you have the feeling that you really remember all the details, or that maybe you’ve forgotten?

A: I’m sure I’ve forgotten a lot of it. I went back over two years ago; went over and celebrated D-Day. Four of us, we went over and had a great time. But I didn’t have a chance to get in to the places I wanted to go. I couldn’t get back to this place. But I have pretty fond memories of that, the big cemeteries and so on. But you kind of shrug it off, and hope it will never happen again. Bill Borth here has created quite a lot of interest. At this meeting they had here this winter, the place was completely jammed and people had to leave. There was not even standing room.

Q: That was the Holocaust memorial program that he had in October [in Willmar]. Do you think it changed your life at all to have seen how terrible people could be to other people?

A: Oh, I don’t know. Maybe unconsciously it changed it somewhat but I can’t pinpoint anything that changed my way of living or feelings.

Q: Did you ever talk to your wife about this? Your children?

A: Oh, yeah, my kids all know about it. I have two boys, they were young when I got home. My wife won’t look at these pictures, because she says they’re too horrible.

Q: Where are your children now?

A: One of ‘em is in town here, the older boy, and then the younger one, who’s forty-some years old now, he lives near Avon, MN, near St. John’s College.

Q: Now you say that you lived in a suburb of Minneapolis, in St. Louis Park, until about 19…

A: ’54.

Q: So what brought you out to Willmar, MN?

A: Well, there was a new way of doing business, called the Fleet Farm stores, that sold farmers replacement parts. I called on some of these people, when I was on the road with these manufacturers, and I thought it looked like a good business, and so another fellow and I put down Polk county, which was Willmar, and a little bit around Willmar – a lot of farms here – and so we opened up a business here. We build a home in St. Louis Park in ’47 and I figured that’s where I’d live and die, and that it would be the end of the road. Well, eight years later, here we are, leaving town.

Q: And so you’ve been in Willmar ever since.

END OF INTERVIEW