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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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 survivors, 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?

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

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

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