

NAME: BERNARD HANSEN  
INTERVIEWER: LYNNE HOFFMAN KEATING  
CAMP: THE GARDELEGEN MASSACRE  
DATE: JUNE 11, 1980

Q: Could you please state your full name?

A: My name is Bernard Hansen.

Q: And could you state your address?

A: I live at 1335 Euclid Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia.

Q: And what's your zip code?

A: 30307

Q: And your date of birth?

A: December 29, 1924.

Q: Do you remember what your age was at the time of liberation?

A: 19.

Q: And what was your prospective profession at the beginning of the war?  
What were you planning to become?

A: I was planning to be a farmer.

Q: And what is your present occupation?

A: I'm a counselor treating alcohol and drug abuse patients.

Q: Are you a social worker?

A: Yes, I'm a social worker.

Q: And what was your military unit during the time of the war?

A: I was with the 411th Field Artillery Group.

Q: And what was your rank at the time of liberation?

A: Corporal.

Q: What camp or camps were you involved in liberating?

A: We were involved with liberating the Gardelegen massacre.

Q: Before your experience with the Gardelegen massacre, had you been involved or had you seen any of the other camps?

A: No, I hadn't. That was the first experience. I had heard about them, but I just hadn't seen any. I thought it was propaganda.

Q: Did you happen to come on this area or were you anticipating going there? How, in fact, did you get to that particular place?

A: We were involved in a drive. It was a [unintelligible]<sup>1</sup> we had five artillery encounters. We were support. We were being called in for provisions and we had no idea... we felt that this massacre was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing. It wasn't something that was going on continuously. It was a surprise.

Q: Did you expect to see what you encountered?

A: No.

Q: Do you remember the mood of your unit as you approached this area?

A: It was unbelievable. I don't know how to describe it. We just couldn't believe this had happened. To see thousands of dead people burned [unintelligible].

Q: Do you remember the date of your arrival? Do you remember approximately?

A: No. I was trying to think last night. I couldn't place when it was. The sequence of it sort of lost me.

Q: Do you remember the year?

A: It was the spring of 1945 and I know it was warm weather because the bodies decomposed so rapidly and the stink, the smell, of the burned bodies was indescribable.

Q: Would it be difficult for you to describe the area and the sights and

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<sup>1</sup>This interview is of poor audio quality. There are many comments Mr. Hansen made that were impossible to understand.

surroundings?

A: As I recall, it was a flat sort of farm area. There was this tremendous barn which had been burned and it had been filled with these people.

Q: They had placed everyone in a barn?

A: In a barn and they had put petrol in it and burned the bodies. We were told they were Jews and political prisoners and that it was a retreat thing to annihilate these people. The Germans were retreating at this point. Three SS, as I recall, because they were still in uniform, were shot by us. I did not witness this.

Q: They were shot when your unit saw all that happened and....

A: Apparently, we had come on the whole thing by surprise and not everybody left [unintelligible].

Q: Were there any prisoners or anyone from the camp or Jews that were still alive?

A: No. There were no survivors. None escaped that we know of. We saw where they had dug in the dirt down near the [unintelligible]. They had dug down in the dirt towards the barn, obviously trying to get out, trying to get covered with dirt.

Q: Was there any estimation as to the number of people that were killed?

A: The estimation was 10,000 and I would be inclined to believe it because of the piles of bodies that we saw and the graves. There was a big ditch. Apparently, the intent was to get everybody in a big hole and to bury them, which had not been accomplished, except in part. Some of the people had been buried, because we had the German townspeople brought up there and individually bury everybody. We made them dig up some of the bodies that were in trenches. But, not all of them had been put in trenches which was obvious from the piles we saw, but we were told that the total count was

about 10,000.

Q: You mentioned that there were some guards that were shot. Were there any guards that were still alive? Were there any other German soldiers around that you were aware of?

A: Not a lot. There were just the townspeople that were brought out to [unintelligible].

Q: So there were no members of the SS that you had to deal with.

A: There were three shot.

Q: Had this obviously occurred rather recently to the point that you [unintelligible]?

A: Yes, it had just occurred. I didn't see all of it until about the third day. The smell was just horrible. You couldn't get near it.

Q: As you were approaching the area, was there any evidence of the smell that was...before you even...?

A: Before we even got there? Yes. It seemed to permeate the whole area.

Q: Did anyone have any idea what the smell was from?

A: I couldn't tell [unintelligible] and I didn't know until I got up close and saw it. We had to move on after and some of the rear echelon people stayed there and took over. Later, I saw some account somewhere. I just can't remember. The time sequence back there seems very vague.

Q: Do you remember any discussions with people in your unit or your own feelings and attitudes reacting to this experience at the time, or was it just part of the war that you were involved with? Did you have an individual reaction to this particular event?

A: It seemed unreal that people could do this to other people. My best friend was from New York, was Jewish, an attorney. Later he really got scared, uptight. Later he told me something more about how the Jews had been

persecuted. I was really not aware. I was from a small farm community in northern Michigan and I was isolated. Later he gave me some history.

Q: Was the massacre in Germany his first experience in seeing any kind of...? Was he visibly affected?

A: He was real, real upset about it.

Q: Did people know at the time that most of the people were Jews?

A: Yes. Our Intelligence section reported it.

Q: You mentioned that there were civilians around the area and in the town.

A: Right, in a town nearby.

Q: Was this a vast open field or was there an actual concentration camp near there?

A: No.

Q: It was just this huge barn.

A: And I don't know where all the number of people came from. I was just horrified by the whole experience. I don't believe I ever asked people where this number of people came from or why they were congregated and brought there. [Unintelligible.]

Q: As you mentioned, the civilians in the surrounding area were asked to come in and help bury the dead until they were all buried. How did they react to this? Was there surprise? Was there knowledge that it had occurred?

A: As I recall seeing these [unintelligible] they were digging individual graves and they were working very hard. There wasn't any conversation. There was complete silence. I was impressed by the silence. Everybody seemed to not say a word to anybody [unintelligible]. It must have been...because the smell was so horrible.

Q: Did there seem to be any sense that the civilians were partly responsible? Were there any violent incidents toward the German civilians? Was there a

need ever to protect them from any violence?

A: Not at that time. I didn't see any violence toward the civilians. They looked scared and I didn't attach the civilians with being the ones that were responsible -- it was so unbelievable at the time -- other than how could people have let this thing happen.

Q: Was there any attempt within your military unit to help the soldiers cope with this experience? Was there any attempt to relieve tension in any way or did you just move forward and about the business of the military?

A: No. There was no discussion of it other than in small groups. And after a few days we had to move on.

Q: There was no discussion while you were there between each other or among different people?

A: Just between us there was.

Q: I see. No official discussion.

A: No official discussion.

Q: Do you recall anyone asking to be relieved of their duties for any period of time? Do you recall anyone having particularly strong reactions or emotional responses?

A: I think Max had the strongest. He was a Jew himself. He talked about if he would be taken prisoner. Later, when we were cut off...later? Yes, later. We were cut off and virtually prisoners. You might recall we talked about it. [Unintelligible].

A: So he in fact was held prisoner.

Q: No. We were just cut off. We were virtually prisoners, but they didn't take us as prisoners. We were cut off from all [unintelligible] and food [unintelligible].

Q: I understand. And how long was that?

A: That was three days. I know Max referred back to the Gardelegen massacre at that point. [Unintelligible.]

Q: Was there a chaplain in your unit? Was there a chaplain in the area and did he maintain any role at this time?

A: No.

Q: Was he present? Was there one present?

A: No.

Q: After you left, did you tell anyone about this experience?

A: After I had come home?

Q: Yes.

A: Not very much. I had those pictures I mentioned, but I seldom ever looked at them. No, I didn't talk about it to anybody.

Q: After you left but were still involved in the military during the war, was there any discussion with other people that you had encountered this kind of massacre?

A: We talked about and wondered how this could possibly happen. How anybody could be caught up in the frenzy of war and kill innocent people.

Q: Why do you feel it's important to talk now?

A: I just think that we need to learn from [unintelligible] and not allow this to happen, why people get so caught up in that kind of propaganda against the Jews to turn into that kind of hate and that kind of killing. It's unbelievable it could happen, but it did happen and I know it did happen. Until I saw that, I didn't believe the propaganda. What I thought was propaganda. I had not thought about it in years until I saw the *Holocaust* program on TV.

Q: You did see the TV show.

A: Right and that brought it all back. I'm glad people are looking at it rather than just pushing it away because it could happen again.

Q: Did you feel the TV show was a good production and a true representation of some of the things that did happen?

A: Yes. I thought it was.

Q: Do you think that this should be taught in the schools in some way?

A: I think, certainly, it should be understood. This idea of one group of people and playing out on...hate as a means of controlling is vile. It certainly could get so far out of hand that it becomes uncontrollable. That's the way I see what happened with the Nazi party. It's built on hate. It perpetuated itself on hate. Fear and hate are such negative emotions.

Q: Can you see a value in including a discussion in religious classes?

A: I really can because this is in modern times that this thing happened. It is not realistic to say that this could not happen again.

Q: Did you have after this experience any difficulty with nightmares?

A: We were [unintelligible] at that point. It seemed like we were sleeping when we could, we moved at night. We didn't change clothes for a week or two or three and we were occupied with survival and little sleep was getting us [unintelligible]. We were zonked.

Q: Were there nightmares when you came back to the states?

A: I had had nightmares and I can recall nightmares about this, and then it went away. And I didn't think about it really much until I saw the *Holocaust*. I didn't talk about it, think about it, but after you called, then I saw the *Holocaust*, and then I had some nightmares after you and I had that first interview.

Q: We had talked before about this experience and you say that after that discussion you did have some nightmares.

A: After you called me with that first interview that night I had a nightmare. [Unintelligible.] Probably I had a need to talk about it.

Q: In the past did you ever have a need to seek counseling as a result of having [unintelligible]?

A: Not as a result of that. [Unintelligible.]

Q: Do you consider yourself religious at this time?

A: At this time. Yes.

Q: Did you have any conscious thoughts about God or religion when you came upon the massacre?

A: No.

Q: Did you have any thoughts you considered that were irreligious?

A: No.

Q: Did religion have anything to do with the way you viewed the civilians in the surrounding area? I say civilians because you say there were no prisoners actually

A: No. I don't think so.

Q: The SS?

A: I think we had fear, and I, as well as the people I talked to, had felt that if we had any opportunity and could identify somebody as an SS we probably wouldn't have taken them alive. I don't know.

Q: Did you ever wonder if you would have kept your faith if you had been a prisoner in that kind of a situation?

A: No.

Q: Did religion have any affect on your attitude towards the Nazis and when you had forgiveness toward the Nazis during that period?

A: I don't think so. Religion [unintelligible] very important in my life. Anybody that could do this to another human being should not even be taken to trial.

Q: Did the experience change your political views in any way?

A: I don't think I had any at that point.

Q: Did you subsequently ever speak out on behalf of the Civil Rights movement, or Viet Nam war, the Middle East, the executions in Cambodia? Did you ever have any active participation in fighting against any of these things as a result of seeing [unintelligible]?

A: No I didn't. I kept quiet about it. I had some feelings about it. [Unintelligible] to read about it in the papers. But I'm glad I didn't have to make the decision as to whether [unintelligible] or not.

Q: Do you have children?

A: Yes.

Q: What would be your reaction if one of your children announced that they intended to become a Nazi? Would you have anything to say to them?

A: Yes. I would have strong feelings. My former brother-in-law was a member of the American Nazi party. We got into some very heated discussions. I felt negative about when he got his degree and became a school teacher. I felt that was [unintelligible]. But I didn't do anything about it.

Q: Does he teach in the schools still? Is he still a member?

A: As far as I know he's still a member. He's teaching high school in another state.

Q: Did you see the massacre and the other events in the concentration camps as primarily a Jewish persecution?

A: Yes. But the reason I did was because my friend Max told me about the Jewish persecutions. Also, I saw there for the first time discrimination against the Jews when I left [unintelligible] because Max and I were great friends and I got promoted over him. I was a little country boy and he was very sharp and I couldn't understand it. Then later he told me it was because he was Jewish. [Unintelligible]

Q: Did this experience cause you to change your attitude at all towards Jews?

A: I didn't have any attitude towards Jews before. I was very well read and I had no negative or positive attitude in my experience in knowing Max and a couple of other [unintelligible] positive ones. It just didn't seem right that this would happen.

Q: Do you feel at all a need to do something today to make sure this never happens again either in education, occupation, personal contacts?

A: You asked me a question about my former brother-in-law teaching school. At that point I just spoke my mind, but if he's teaching my children I wouldn't...you see what I mean? I would do something if it affected me personally, apparently. Apparently I wouldn't do anything unless [unintelligible].

Q: That's important that you were real honest in how you feel and how you would act.

A: I feel very negative about the Nazi party. [Unintelligible]

Q: We are deeply indebted to you for sharing your experiences and your thoughts again. And you've done something important, and we appreciate it very much.