NAME: RICHARD SCHIFTER

INTERVIEWER: LILLY SINGER

CAMP: NORDHAUSEN

DATE:

Q: Mr. Schifter was in the "T" Force of the 12th Army group. Both his parents were born in Poland and perished in Maidanek.

A: Let me try to be more exact about this. I know for a fact that my father and mother were in Lublin, and that they survived the first set of killings. And in March, 1942, they were in what was then known as the Rest Ghetto of Maidantertarski. According to what I read recently, the Rest Ghetto was liquidated in November, 1942. I had thought that my parents were sent to Maidanek. More recently, I have been told by a survivor that the train from Maidantertarski was sent to Auschwitz, but never got there.

Q: Did you live here already for quite a while by that time? You were born, I assume, in Poland.

A: I was born in Vienna. My family lived in Vienna and I came to the U.S. in December, 1938.

Q: So you came as a young man alone?

A: That's right. I was 15.

Q: And your parents?

A: They tried to follow. The problem was one of who qualified for what kind of visa. As a native of Vienna, I qualified under what then became the German quota; my parents were under Polish quota.

Q: So you left your parents in Vienna.

A: Yes, that's right, and they fled to Poland in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the war, just to wait there until the visas....

Q: Did they flee or were they resettled as part of this resettlement that happened in 1938 of anybody who had originally been born on Polish soil?

A: What happened was this. My parents happened to have been citizens of Poland, and they opted at the end of World War I for Polish citizenship. Under the laws passed by Poland in 1938, they, as well as a good many others, were expatriated. It so happens that I had been a citizen of Poland too, under the prevailing law, because my father was a Polish citizen. And all of us were expatriated and became so-called stateless and were not allowed back into Poland. My father and mother, therefore, left illegally in 1939 -- I think around May of 1939 -- to cross into Poland illegally. They were smuggled essentially across the border into the country whose native they were and whose citizens they had been for practically all of their lives.

Q: So, you were really a perfect choice for the kind of job you had during the war in the Army. You spoke German fluently.

A: Yes.

Q: And you, by that time, spoke English fluently.

A: Yes.

Q: And you had finished college. And that is why you were chosen for the tasks...does the "T" in "T" Force stand for Task Force?

A: "T" Force as it turned out stood for nothing. It was just called "T" Force. The background was this: a good many of us were trained at the Military Intelligence Training Center at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, for interrogation of prisoners of war. And we were made up into what were known as IPW Teams. There were six members to a team. Each team was trained to interrogate prisoners of war. When the idea originated of creating a "T" Force, 12th Army group, which was an Intelligence Unit at the army group level, it was decided by whoever made the decisions to put a number of IPW Teams into the group, into this "T" Force.

My team was one of those that was put into that group.

Q: How long were you in Europe at the time when you entered Camp Dora? How much did you know ahead of time? Did you have any idea what to expect? How much knowledge did you have on your own? How much knowledge did you have from your superiors in the Army?

A: First of all, on the question of how long I was in Europe, I went to England in June of 1944. I arrived on the continent at Omaha Beach in August, 1944. We then traveled through France, Luxembourg, Belgium, and our group was in Aachen [Germany] in October, 1944. We had been detached from the "T" Force and were attached to the First Infantry Division which took Aachen in October, 1944. We spent the winter of 1944-45 in Aachen after the front had stabilized there. So I was in the first German city to be occupied.

Q: Were you living in a military compound?

A: We all lived in a town house. What happened was the Germans had emptied out the city. I think it had a population at that time of about 160,000. When we were there, there may have been 10,000 to 15,000 people who had come back, but the city had been empty and there were lots of empty houses, and we just took one of them.

Q: What about the rest of the Army? The occupying forces? Were they also in private homes?

A: No, there were some camps nearby. We were engaged in interrogating the civilian population, so we lived in the city and we had established an office in the city.

Q: What were your feelings about living among the Germans during the war and interviewing them and how much was your attitude, whatever it was, affected by what you did or did not know about what was going on in concentration camps?

A: This is what I want to say on that question. I had some ideas. Because of my

parents I had followed things closely. As a matter of fact, I recently talked to Walter Lacquer about the question of when did one first get news about what was going on as far as the killing of the Jews is concerned. I believe that the first reports must have reached me either late in 1941 or sometime early in 1942.

Q: So you had not only the knowledge, but you had also the concern and worry about your family.

A: Very definitely and I was conscious of it. I remember writing a letter to my parents after Lublin was occupied by the Soviets in 1944 and expecting not very much, but hoping. It must have been the summer of 1944 because I remember writing from London. And then after a while the letter came back saying addressee unknown.

Q: You were really emotionally involved?

A: Oh yes, yes.

Q: And what was this like to be in such close contact with the civilian population?

A: I guess I never believed in collective guilt. I dealt with individual persons. And when we met the Germans in Aachen, the standard refrain from everyone was that they never belonged, they never participated in anything. At that time, after all, Hitler was still a leader and some of us were talking to each other about when we would be interrogating Hitler, and he would say [Mr. Schifter says someething in German][1] or something like that.

Q: So you were able to stand this proximity of the German general population because you did not identify them really with the...

A: As I say, I am a believer in personal guilt. Not collective guilt.

Q: How much contact did you have with the German military personnel?

A: I remember one of my first jobs after we had gotten to London...actually we

[1]German phrase meaning "have never been part of it or near it"

were in a place called Broadway in England. We were exposed to some opportunities to exercise our skills in prisoner of war interrogation. This was at the time when the first prisoners were coming in from Normandy. A good many of them were members of crack German Army units, parachutists. I was 21 at the time, I guess, and I had been assigned a person to interrogate, someone who obviously spoke with an Austrian accent. So I started talking to him and he gave me his name, rank and serial number, and then stopped talking. When I asked him where he was from, he said Oberdonau which translates into Upper Danube, which is a province of Austria which the Nazis had renamed. It used to be known as Oberosterreich [which translates into] Upper Austria, and they tried to eliminate the word "Osterreich" or Austria and it became Oberdonau. So, the result of it was that he said Oberdonau; I said Oberosterreich. He said Oberdonau again; I said Oberosterreich and he stopped talking. He didn't want to talk any more. It so happens that we had been taught how you make prisoners of war talk. It's very easy. As a matter of fact, from all that I hear all over Europe, every one of us who used this particular device found that it worked. The idea was to call in somebody else and say to that person who I called in, "Here is a candidate for the next shipment to Russia." And that's all I had to say and the man responded then, [Mr. Schifter says something in German][2].

Q: How did the type of feelings you may have had for this Austrian soldier in England compare to any German military personnel you may have...

A: This is a German soldier.

Q: Yes, but after you had been in camps and after you knew what they really had done.

A: I was specialized enough in my appraisal of it to distinguish between soldiers

[2]German phrase meaning "What do you still wish to know?"

and SS men, and particularly members of the *Totenkopf* groups.

Q: What were your instructions on handling the *Totenkopf* brigade?

A: I don't remember any specific instructions on that, but the point was that anyone in any way connected with the SS was subject to automatic arrest.

Q: Were you cautioned to be extremely careful with them?

A: No.

Q: Not at all?

A: There were no specific instructions on that.

Q: So you had been in Europe from spring of 1944 in England and then you came to Aachen.

A: In June. I think I must have gotten there [England] shortly after D-Day.

Q: And you got to Aachen...?

A: October of 1944.

Q: And then what was your first contact with seeing a concentration camp? How did you learn about it? What made you go there and what really happened?

A: If I remember correctly, the reason why we went to Camp Dora was because our group was supposed to inspect industrial sites and at Nordhausen there was a mountain; there was a tunnel in the mountain, in which rockets were being built. If I remember correctly, what happened was that we were sent there to look at the installation and make an appraisal of it. During that period one of the important assignments that we had was to appraise the result of bombing and, because consideration was given, I suppose, to what might have to be done to gear up for further military effort against Japan, to inspect whatever industrial facilities there were. The way I remember it, our task in going there was to take a look at the rocket manufacturing installation, and it was in that context that we found the concentration camp with a lot of Jewish prisoners.

Q: You say "found." You found it once you got there? I mean how much of a

shock was it? Did you know that you were going to go to a concentration camp as near the installation...?

A: I think so. I think we were told that there was a concentration camp near Nordhausen called Camp Dora, and that this is where we should go.

Q: What did you think you were going to find when you got to the concentration camp? I mean, it's a word we've used now for so many years. What did it mean to you then?

A: Again, I had some idea. I may have been atypical but I had some idea.

Q: And you went in anyway?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you find and how did you feel with what you found, especially you?

A: It's 35 years later. Let me just see what I can remember. Let me just give you snatches of things that stand out. We were quickly looking for the Jews. There were others as well, and I remember then speaking to people who were, if I remember correctly at that point, still in their pajama striped uniforms. I remember speaking Yiddish to them and [I remember] the feeling that overcame them when they saw somebody in an American uniform carrying a rifle, speaking Yiddish to them. It was not immediately after the occupation of the area, it must have been a few days later. They had already been reached by that time by a Jewish chaplain, because I remember they were discussing that somebody had already been there and had started to make arrangements for them to have some extra food allocations. From the discussion, I also remember their making some reference about mistreatment of them in the camp by some of the Polish prisoners and their feeling of discomfort of being in the same camp with the people who had really not dealt with them well and who were now also among the liberated prisoners. What I also remember is the oven, and their showing us the pit in which ashes were dumped. You may want to keep in mind

that this was not an extermination camp. People were killed if they couldn't work any more, I suppose. They weren't killing people the way they were doing it in Birkenau or Treblinka or Sobibor.

Q: So were there women and children around there at all?

A: I only remember men. That's what I remember -- men.

Q: Only men, so this was a working....

A: That's right, this was a working camp. I believe that some of them may have been brought from Auschwitz. They all worked on making the rockets. This was a work camp.

Q: Did they look as emaciated as the people who were left in Buchenwald or Bergen Belsen?

A: No.

Q: They were less emaciated. They looked stronger?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have the feeling that these are your people? Did you identify with them? Were you able to say, "My God, this could have been my cousin or..."

A: Yes, true.

Q: ....were you very distant?

A: No. The former.

Q: That's a very, very important distinction that I find between you, for instance, and people who had no family so this must have been almost like a personal kind of a feeling of wanting to help.

A: Absolutely and, as a matter of fact, if I remember correctly, Morrie Parloff[3] and I went in together and we talked about that. Morrie spoke some Yiddish too, so both of us were able to communicate in Yiddish. And what I remember was that

[3]Dr. Morris Parloff. The Witness to the Holocaust Project also recorded his oral testimony.

that certainly made a big impression on the people and we felt good about it.

Q: So you did feel compassion?

A: Of course.

Q: And a feeling of identification?

A: Yes. Very definitely.

Q: Many Americans did not. You 're aware of that.

A: Yes, sure.

Q: Did you ever think what would have happened to you if you had been in the same situation? How you would have reacted?

A: Yes, I somehow came to the conclusion I would not have made it.

Q: So it was frightening, on top of everything else, on a personal level.

A: I guess one doesn 't think about it in that sense. I wasn 't thinking about it at that point. At least I don't remember. I reflected on it afterwards.

Q: But you did feel that they were human beings. And by that time, they had already had some care and some attention.

A: As I say, what I distinctly remember was that when we were talking to them about trying to make special arrangements for them they told us that a Jewish chaplain had already been to see them and that he was stationed in Nordhausen and was going to work on it. As a matter of fact, if I remember correctly, Morrie and I even got in touch with the Jewish chaplain, and we followed up on that.

Q: Your feelings towards survivors were very warm and very caring. Obviously you identified and so on. What happened to your feelings towards the German SS? Did you then say, "My God, they did it."

A: I thought about this at the time, and let me put it this way. I emphasized that I am not a believer in collective guilt; therefore, I did not blame any individual that as far as I knew was not guilty, but I thought about it at the time. I remember thinking that if there were a group of concentration camp guards lined

up, and if I were to get behind a machine gun and gun them down that I would do it with equanimity, without worrying about it one bit. I remember thinking about it at the time and coming to that conclusion.

Q: Anger.

A: Anger.

[End of Side One. Side Two continues as follows.]

Q: How strongly do you feet about publicizing the Holocaust, what happened, teaching it, and in what form?

A: First of all, on that, I'll give you at the conclusion of the interview two papers that I have written on the subject.

Q: I would love to have it.

A: Let me tell you about some of my involvements. I served on the Advisory Committee of the Holocaust Commission. I have just now been appointed to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, so I am involved in that particular matter. I think it is important to emphasize the Holocaust experience. I think it is important for people to know and to understand what it is that went on. I served as a member of the Maryland Board of Education, including some years as its president, and in that capacity I did not want to be in the forefront of it, simply because I did not feel that the personal tragedy of my family ought to be put on the agenda by me. But the fact of the matter is that the Superintendent of Schools of Maryland did put it on the agenda, and I certainly encouraged it.

Q: How do you feel about projects such as the TV movie, the *Holocaust*?

A: I decided to see only snatches of it, not the whole thing. From what I saw, I recognized the justification of some of the criticism in terms of inaccuracies; on the other hand, I think in terms of bringing the story vividly to the attention of a great many people it succeeded, and from that point of view, I thought it was

good.

Q: Would you prefer to see more of that type of a show or more of the realistic, non-fictional accounts that we have available to us; that is, interviewing survivors...?

A: I believe in seeing results in terms of as many people as possible understanding and getting a feeling for it. It's from that point of view that fictionalized presentations produce more, even though they may be less satisfying to the survivors.

Q: What about religion? There are two parts of that that I don't want to forget to ask you. Number one is did you encounter any anti-Semitism in the Army, on the part of other U.S. Army personnel, or on the part of the civilian population?

A: Neither.

Q: That's great. What about your own religious feelings before the experience and after? What was it and did it change as a result of the experience?

A: Let me just try to think. I was Bar Mitzvahed. I laid tffilin for four years after that, and then my basic point of view then became agnostic. I guess it has remained that, but my son was Bar Mitzvahed and we belong to a conservative synagogue. I don't think much about the theological aspects of it. I am active in pro-Israel matters, and all of my children have been to Israel. Some of them have stayed there for a number of years, so there is an involvement from that point of view.

Q: There was no feeling of the kind if there is a God, how could He permit this or is there God in relation to the...?

A: I know the question. Before that experience I had stopped thinking in those terms.

Q: So that was not part of it. Your religious beliefs really were not affected and also did not color your thinking towards the survivors of the camps, nor towards the

Germans or anybody else. That was not part of it. What about your political views? Do you think that the experience had something to do with shaping them?

A: No. I don't think so. My political views were shaped before then and they have remained, strangely enough, very, very similar ever since.

Q: So your view of our involvement - civil rights, Viet Nam, etc.,...all these feelings were pretty much crystallized before that, in other words the feelings that we are going to make decisions and opinions on our involvement?

A: Yes, very different.

Q: Did it in any way change your attitude to Jews?

A: Yes. It made me feel very strongly about continuing, and my family continuing, as Jews.

Q: It sounds like the family was orthodox -- your parents.

A: Only in a formalistic sense. It so happens that only yesterday I talked to one of my children about it. I did some of these things, if I remember correctly, on my own, stimulated by factors other than the home.

Q: You were saying you were [unintelligible], that you were [unintelligible] for four years, and then came to the U.S. without the family, and, I am guessing, you probably did not find a ready-made family where you would have your holidays as observed, etc.

A: I stayed with my grandmother's brother.

Q: So you did have a Jewish milieu.

A: Yes, very definitely. In fact, that is where I learned Yiddish. In New York.

Q: I learned it during the war when I had to help myself. A very orthodox Jew in the Polish countryside would not understand my German. And I still don't speak it well. What I am really trying to ask is do you think you would have gone further away from the practice of Judaism, of belonging to a temple or having

your son bar mitzvahed, if having lived through this....

[Tape ends. Apparently the conversation that continued on the next tape was quite garbled. After Ms. Singer discovered the problem, she fixed the recorder and continued the discussion, trying to reconstruct the part she missed as best she could. That conversation is as follows.]

Q: Do you feel that your choice of profession had anything to do with your experiences during the war?

A: I don't think so.

Q: Do you feel that we're doing enough to ensure that this kind of a Holocaust never happens? Do you feel that we should be doing something else?

A: The question, of course, is who is "we?" I would say that as far as Jews are concerned, first of all, I do believe in the uniqueness of the Jewish experience. I have some theories on that subject. In other words, I believe that the Holocaust was one of the consequences of the Jewish experience in the Christian world and relates to the deicide charge. I believe in that rather firmly. I do believe that perhaps the most significant aspect of recent developments in that context was the decision of the Catholic Church and Pope John XXIII to significantly modify its theological positions to the extent to which the Christian world can get further away from the deicide charge. To that extent, that type of anti-Semitism can be expected to decline further. At the same time, I think all of us are conscious of the fact that there's a certain amount of rebirth of anti-Semitism in the context of what is happening to the state of Israel today.

Q: Do you see the Holocaust as primarily a Jewish problem or do you see it also as a world problem?

A: This issue does come up from time to time in analyzing what happened during

WWII. It's a world problem in that it was done to the Jews. Now by that if you mean is it the kind of thing that has happened to other people, I would say the point that is being made that it wasn't 6 million people who died but 11 million people...I would put it this way. The experience of the Jews was shared only by the Gypsies and nobody else in that people were being killed not for what they had done but for what they were. I believe a great many people who were killed were commissars, political agents of the Soviet Army, who had been picked out from the Russian prisoners and were killed. They were being killed for what they had done. As far as a good many people in Poland being killed as Poles, they were killed also for specific acts. There were no children or old people -- men and women that were being killed. I think it's significant that the last shipments from Hungary to Auschwitz took place under circumstances that were really detrimental to the German effort to save itself because [unintelligible] was diverted to transport Jews when it could have been used for other things. The argument is being made, take a look at what happened to the Armenians. I think what happened to the Armenians was horrible, no question about that. But in a way I believe that the killing of Armenians by the Turks constituted an expression of reacting to what was perceived to be very definitely a threat. The Armenians were recognized as human beings. Jews were killed under circumstances under which they were really treated as vermin. So my answer, therefore, is that I happen to think that the Holocaust was only a perfection of an experience of a method of dealing with Jews that stretches back to the 11th century. It was just a matter of being technologically more competent than, let's say, the members of the First Crusade were.

Q: Thank you very much. I just hope that I can somehow reconstruct the part that's missing.

A: Go ahead and ask me the questions.

Q: I don't know what to ask. I think we probably are missing the part of the relationship between the inmates to each other, the German civilian population to each other, and also to you and the U.S. Army.

A: What I was trying to say is that I remember rather distinctly the Jewish former inmates of camp Dora telling us about being mistreated by the Poles; that is, by Polish fellow inmates and their being unhappy about still being, after the liberation of the camp, in close proximity to the people who had been so unpleasant and cruel to them. That's as far as that particular relationship is concerned. I was saying that I do not recall any incidents involving violence on the part of Jewish prisoners against the German population. What I do remember were circumstances under which the Russian forced laborers, people who were not in concentration camps but who were quartered near factories and were their forced laborers, went on a rampage after the American military forces arrived and in many instances found something to drink. I remember incidents where they would drink wood alcohol and then go blind. There were many incidents of that type and the German civilian population asking us for help.

Q: And there was no violence among the prisoners themselves? The survivors.

A: I certainly do not recall any. No. As a matter of fact I know of none.

Q: How did they view you? Were they very happy, grateful? Were they clinging? Were they pleading? What was their emotional attitude?

A: What I remember was that they were obviously deeply emotionally affected by talking to Americans in military uniform, carrying military weapons, who were speaking Yiddish to them. That undoubtedly was something that moved them very deeply.

Q: I'd like to check something out with you. Dr. Parloff gave me permission to. He said the camp had been evacuated and that you were surprised to find some hundred or more people there and when they were asked why they were still

there, they said something about having been evacuated, being put on a train, and being thrown off the train by the Polish people. And that 's why they were still there or, actually, according to their story, that 's why they were back there. You seem to feel that they were left there and that the Polish people were giving them some problems. Those are different stories. Do you have a recollection?

A: I wonder whether the story of the train might not involve the fact that the people who were at Camp Dora had been working at other work camps in the East and were transported, when some of these were evacuated, to Camp Dora.

Q: In other words, these people were really there. They had not been evacuated. There was no attempt to have them evacuated before that.

A: Yes. I think what he may remember is that they were evacuated maybe from Auschwitz or from some other place. In other words, what has to be underlined is that the people who were working at Camp Dora were working on the manufacture of rockets. They may have done that elsewhere and may have been evacuated from wherever they were with others, with perhaps also machines. Come to think of it, it may very well have been that this entire venture was of fairly recent origin because, as I mentioned, it was in a mountain. It was a cave in a mountain or a tunnel in a mountain. And that may not have been the original location of a good many of these works, and that 's what may have happened.

Q: So I understand the events. In other words, the people you found there were not just the remnants of the people who were there and the majority had been evacuated. They were all there.

A: Yes. That 's the way I remember it.

Q: That clarifies something.

A: There was no place to go. Where would they have gone?

Q: I don 't know. The way Dr. Parloff spoke was that the camp had been partially

evacuated already and the only reason these people were still there was because they returned because the Poles threw them off a train. Dr. Parloff had some feelings about it.

A: I certainly remember the strong feelings that were expressed by the people there about the Poles. It may have been perhaps other experiences....

Q: ....that blended into that. I 'm just wondering what we missed. I think possibly we missed my questions about your reactions to your own emotional feelings of what you went through and what you did or did not do with them.

A: Yes, I suppose what I was saying was that the experience that we had in visiting Camp Dora, when compared to the experience other people had of visiting other camps, was almost benign. Under those circumstances, given the totality of our experiences in western Europe at the time, having gone through bombed-out cities and then coming up against camp Dora, it did not make the kind of impression on us that, let 's say, the people that visited or liberated Dachau or Buchenwald had. I guess that was the point I was trying to make. Certainly in my own recollection of the period it was the kind of thing that I would have, I suppose, considered unnecessary boasting to make very much about camp Dora when there were many, more horrible experiences, because, as we discussed, the Jews at camp Dora were to the best of my recollection relatively young males who were there as workers who, therefore, were permitted to continue to live.

Q: That 's why they call the [unintelligible]. Your experiences were not as [unintelligible] as the others. I think I have it all because once they transcribe it I will look over, more or less, the questions and then if there is something missing, I 'll certainly remember what you said because your attitudes are not that easy to forget. I would appreciate any material that you want to give me.