

INTERVIEWER: *Rabbi Ben Brhak*

TESTIMONIAL OF: Dr. Laurence G. Thouin

DATE: July 26, 1979

INTERVIEWER: What is your name please?

DR. THOUIN: Laurence G. Thoun, M.D.

INTERVIEWER: And where do you live?

DR. THOUIN: 1160 NE Street Anaheim, California.

INTERVIEWER: When were you born?

DR. THOUIN: June 15, 1918

INTERVIEWER: How old were you at the time you were drafted?

You weren't drafted into the army were you?

DR. THOUIN: NO. It was a peculiar situation in that the Second World War was in full swing, and those of us who were interning were cut down from a twelve month internship to a nine month internship. But at seven months of my internship I received telegraph orders to active duty. Now I knew that that was due to the fact that I belonged to the medical ROTC. And since I'd had training back at the Medical Field Service School in Pennsylvania, that I was gonna hit a combat unit, initially.

INTERVIEWER: So how old were you at this time?

DR. THOUIN: About 24.

INTERVIEWER: Before the war began you were obviously in medical school, and what specialty were you pursuing?

DR. THOUIN: I persued, as usual, three years pre-med and four years of medical school at the University of Minnesota. I was not granted my degree until I had finished my internship, which was a stipulation of the University of Minnesota Medical School.

So, being cut short and sent to active duty, I did get my degree in absentia.

INT.: You served in the European Theatre. Do you remember coming across Europe, and could you tell me which concentration camps you liberated, or saw?

THOUIN: The 14th Army Division, which I was commanding officer of the 62nd Armoured Infantry Medical Detachment. And we were trained in the States, shipped out, and entered Marseilles and bivouaced for about six weeks, preparatory to starting our trek north. From there we went, we were assigned to go into the ????? mountains in the middle of winter, which skeptics thought was impossible. But our division knifed through those ????? mountains, and came out on the ????? Plain, and we kept on meeting occasional German resistance efforts, but we dispatched those without difficulty, until the time of the ????? Now we were South of the ?????, but the southern edge of that ??? was very weak, so there was formed a task force Hudelson. And naturally my unit, the 62nd Medical Detachment was chosen, along with the tank and artillery battallions, to join this task force to support that southern end of the ????? From that time on we were transferred to Patton, General Patton. Having previously been in the 7th Army under General Patch, we now were under the command of General Patton. And our orders were specific and explicit, and that consisted of: advance expeditiously and as fast as possible through the remainder of France, and into Germany. And we did just that. We were faced by three elite panzer divisions, which are German armoured divisions, and our single division was able to cope with them after very bitter fighting and

many casualties. And we continued to proceed right to the outskirts of Berlin. But because of the treaty that the ill Pres. Roosevelt and the Kremlin had signed, we were forced to stop at the outskirts, despite the pleading of the Berliners to enter Berlin and take the entire city. We were completely frustrated in our attempt to accomplish our objective, which was to take Berlin.

INT: You presently work as a doctor, don't you? And you have a practice here in Anaheim?

THOUIN: Yes. My specialty was... I'm a Board Certified Diplomate of the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, but that endeavor was taken after my return to the States.

INT: I want to go back to the period of the war and ask you when did you first hear of the concentration camps, and how did you hear of them?

THOUIN: We heard of concentration camps through a G. I. newspaper, published for all of us. I've forgotten the name of it but Malden and his characters. . . the cartoonist, were quite typical of our G.I.'s, and we enjoyed that paper tremendously, except for the disturbing and sometimes horrifying stories of two concentration camps in particular that were collecting, concentrating, and burning alive Jewish people, either pro or con Nazi, it made no difference. The mere fact was that they were Jewish. Hitler was an egomaniac, and it appeared self-evident that he was out for genocide. Pure and simple genocide of the Jewish people.

INT: I'm aware of the fact that this is a very difficult thing for you to talk about, it brings up a lot of difficult memories. When you came to the camp—Which camp did you come to first, or did you come to a camp first?

THOUIN: Our division was known as the Liberators. The Germans

called us Blutdurstig Division, which in German means bloodthirsty. As far as we were concerned, we were just doing a job. While the war was still on, we didn't actually encounter any of these concentration camps, neither Buchenwald or Dachau. We didn't really encounter those, but as we were, as we approached the boundary into Germany the Germans began to develop what you might call scared feet. Because they started to ship back boxcar after boxcar after boxcar, loaded with what remained of the Jewish people that they did not have time to put into the fire chambers. And as a battallion surgeon I naturally was the first with my corpsmen to be at those boxcars, and to actually open those doors.

INT: Where was this that you first saw the boxcars? Do you remember?

THOUIN: The name of the town slipped my mind, but they weren't too far from Buchenwald and Dachau. That we did know. And the initial shock on my part was that here were human bodies piled one on top of the other, right to the very ceiling of the boxcar. And what would tear your heart out was coming from within those boxcars was a faint whisper. Now as a doctor I knew those were not whispers. I knew that, and recognized them as human beings that somehow or other had been able to sustain life. Now our division at that time, as I say we were known as the Liberators, and we had freed stalag after stalag in??????? Germany, some 50,000 American and British prisoners, and so on. But this happened to be top preference to me. I arranged for a convalescent home, and as carefully as we could, my corpsmen separated those arms and limbs. Checking for respiration, checking for pulses, in order to make certain that that poor individual still sustained life. Now, we transferred them to these convalescent homes and I really received a terrible shock. Not only to see what the residue of a human being,

but one that was still fighting for life. Now initially I and my assistant battallion surgeon made , admittedly, a big error. We tried to feed them intravenously since they could take nothing by mouth. But in that process, using our normal intravenous glucose-salien solution, the patients were too weak, their condition was such that they could not accept it nor their liver matabolise it. And so, for the first 20 or 30, they died.

INT: It couldn't be helped. You tried to help them.

THOUIN: So I and my assistant battallion surgeon, under my instructions, diluted the intravenouses by 50% addition of plain, sterile water. And the mortality rate dropped accordingly. However I still was not satisfied, and we got down to the point where we were only using a 25% solution of the glucose and the salien, and the remainder water. That was the proper ratio with which these poor, you could almost call them skeletons, could survive. But it was very gratifying.

INT: What was your battallion chief's name? Do you remember? Your battallion assistant's name, excuse me.

THOUIN: My battallion surgeon's? Ralph Miller.

INT: How did the corpsmen and the people with you react?

THOUIN: Well, I tried to keep my corpsmen out of there because this was right at the front line. We were falling behind actually, because we were in Germany...I had no place to go. My primary duty and my primary to there really was to save any Jewish person who had that extra spark, that extra enthusiasm for life. I learned a lesson then which I've found of invaluable use in my private practice. Since then, general surgeons here in Southern California have found the some thing to be true. For instance in operating on an elderly, debilitated patients, the most important thing is to

interview closely and become very close to these patients who must undergo major surgery, and actually determine as closely as you can, their will to live. Because that is fundamental in the elderly or debilitated when it comes to major surgery. You can lose a patient on the operation table or off, in the critical Intensive Care Unit or out, if that particular individual had no desire to live. You've got to fight to live. If you enjoy life, you've got to fight for it!

INT: Doctor I'm curious, had you received any orders regarding the people that you found in the boxcars? Did you anticipate what you found in the boxcars at all? Or is it just that you stumbled upon it?

THOUIN: Well, you didn't so much stumble upon it, but you could smell the boxcars coming. The reek, the stench. It wasn't an odor, it was a stench. And the same thing that was true at Dachau and Buchenwald, the stench is perceivable ten miles away, regardless of which way the wind's blowing. You know that you're approaching one of the concentration camps that the Nazi's were using to exterminate Jews.

INT: You said that you'd arranged for convalescent care for these individuals. Was this in convalescent homes, or was it in homes of civilians?

THOUIN: No. As we were moving so fast, the boxcars were coming to us. It was in German territory, but these convalescent homes, or hospitals had been hastily evacuated. So naturally that was ideal since all of the equipment and instruments, professional material happened to be right there. So that was no problem.

INT: Were there any German officers or civilians attending these boxcars, or were they anywhere in sight? At all?

THOUIN: No sir. No they, the German people were not all as bad as depicted. Many of them under Hitler--I'm refering to the officers--

many of them were fully aware, especially in the higher echelon, that they were under the command of a madman. A former house-painter who terribly disliked the Jewish race. And when he came into power. . . he depicts the typical genocidal maniac.

INT: Were any of the people that were in the boxcars able to talk to you?

THOUIN: There were none. I spoke German because I took alot of German in high school and college back in Minnesota in order to get into medical school, because at that time it was required. So I. . . Every single one of these patients, even those that showed life were unable to speak, Were unable to open their eyes, Were unable to open their mouths. If you didn't have a practiced and skilled hand you would have crossed them off as dead. But I was persistent. I felt a dedication, and despite the fact that they could not communicate, they could nod their head or flick their eyelids. That was the only form of communication. And especially when they started to improve, it was very rewarding, and exciting.

INT: What about other officers and other soldiers. What was their reaction?

THOUIN: No. For fear of infection, these, ..it's difficult to label them. They weren't human really. No, it's just too difficult to try and label them. I kept everyone away who was not accustomed to caring for them, for fear of contamination or infection.

INT: When we had talked earlier you said for a long long while you'd never even talked about this to anyone. It had such a traumatic effect on you. Could you recount that?

THOUIN: Well as a combat battalion surgeon coming up from Marseilles all the way up through ????? mountains, the ????, and across the rest of France and Germany I developed what you might call a perfect closed compartment mind. Anything as horribly, obscenely horrible was forced back into this recess and never brought forth. I've never told this. I've never said anything about this, not even to my wife who I love dearly and is close to me. It was in that closed compartment, thank God. But I told my interviewer that I'd be willing to come out with it to the best of my knowledge. And that's what I've done.

INT: What kind of people do you think would do these things that the Nazis did? How did you feel then towards those people?

THOUIN: Well at that time I was convinced that they were not only sadistic, but they were masochistic. Now we have them here in our jails. I know because I've been into one of them, where there are certain guards who enjoy nothing better in the form of exercise than to take one of the little Chicano prisoners for a round or two. I could hear them screaming through the ventilation. That brought back my impression of the kind of guards that must have been assigned to these concentration divisions. For instance that female from Dachau or Buchenwald, I can't remember which. She was an out and out masochist. Delighted--that type of barren personality, distorted mentality, is still present in this world. But thank God they're recognized and under control, for the most part.

INT: How long were you involved with the relief of these people that you found in the boxcars? A day or two?

THOUIN: Oh no. Oh no. I felt it my duty as a doctor to remain with these patients until such time as I could notice obvious

improvement.

INT: This was despite the fact that casualties were coming in from the front.

THOUIN: My assistant battallion surgeon . . . Actually when we got so close to Berlin, and the Berliners were begging us to come in and take the city, there weren't many casualties. Thank the Lord for that too. Because they were doing their best, practically getting down on their hands and knees and begging for us to come in to Berlin. They weren't about to turn around and shoot us.

Except for a few belligerant, adavistic, masochistic individuals.

INT: Were there chaplains from the army more visible let's say in this time? Were they allowed to visit some of the people who had been taken out of the boxcars and transferred to the convalescent home?

THOUIN: Well actually at this particular time we were so far in advance that we'd even run out of our supplies. General Patton-- that was one of his pet peeves, because the supplies could not keep up with us. We had Thanksgiving turkey at Easter-time as I recall. That was the speed with which we were taking these towns. Willy-nilly. We had a wonderful division. In fact we even got to the point where we sent an emissary to meet an emissary from the town we were approaching. The mayor or ex-official and negotiate: we will not destroy your town if you let us pass through it peacefully. Now these mayors and so on were so terribly afraid of Hitler many of them refused, which would pretty well level the town. And then we'd order a tank barrage so that the tanks could get their big barrels zeroed in on the town. And then we would move in, and the first thing my objective was to find a suitable aid station. And I had a very close friend who was what you might call my left arm, by the name of Jake (Held??) I'd send him ahead to pick out the aid station. It was usually a schoolhouse or a ????. Because they had

the tables and we could set the ??? right on them. Right on the tables and proceed to give them the proper medical care and then evacuate. But actually, near the end of the war we were willing to make a deal you might say. Offer these towns a chance to save their city, and if not, we had no other alternative but to just go right through and level the town to the ground. It was, as far as I was concerned, a terrible waste, and hundreds of people unnecessarily killed.

INT: When the people that you were trying to help were taken out of the boxcar and they died, who was put in charge of burying?

THOUIN: The German or civilian population that was picked up by S-4, which is the supply department of any division, and they would dig the graves and bury these people, with some identification if possible.

INT: I imagine that was pretty hard to do.

THOUIN: I will say this ~~from~~ <sup>for</sup> my division, especially my medical detachment. You see my medical detachment was very very close to me. They were 32 men, not counting my assistant battallion surgeon, that had trained in the States and had gone through what I mentioned, and we were as close as brother and sister. We were one big family, in reality. And to lose anyone of us was a blow to all. I had in my medical detachment two of the most wonderful aid men, good personalities, good dispositions, and they were Jewish. Those son-of-a-guns had no respect for Hitler whatsoever. In fact, you'd think those two were gonna lick the entire German population. They would walk down the middle of a street about six or eight feet apart, and both of them carrying an automatic rifle, and any Crout they saw got blasted. That's all I can say, because the two of them were taking their lives in their hands because we hadn't completely taken the town yet. Some sniper could have picked them

both off. But boy, they were gonna get their licks in, and that was their way of showing their contempt for Hitler.

INT: Did they react in any particular way when these boxcars were opened? What were their reactions?

THOUIN: I kept them away. They were good-hearted boys and I knew they couldn't take it. I didn't want them there, and that was my decision and I'm glad I kept them away. ???????????????  
They were two wonderful boys.

INT: You know, in reflecting back upon this, what do you think should be taught in schools, churches, synagogues, about World War II and the Holocaust?

INT: I didn't see the Holocaust myself, the movie. When I first came back and was discharged from the 14th Armoured, and I had rejoined my wife--it was in New York City, she was waiting for me there. There were alot of war movies out, and I would prefer not to see war movies. Then I thought it's about time for me to get over this, it was sort of ridiculous anyway, and so I went with my wife into a movie, a war picture, but when I started hearing those shells coming over... The trained ear of a fellow who'd been in combat can tell when they're going over, can tell when they are gonna fall short, and tell when they're gonna hit and kill ya'. I could stand only about 20 minutes of that before my emotions got the upper hand and I had to leave.

INT: What do you think ought to be taught about the Holocaust?

THOUIN: The only impression I can get from what you've told me, is that, first of all, number one, war is hell! That's with a capital H, capital E, and two capital L's. And there's no two ways about that. Anybody that would argue against that is an idiot. And the Holocaust, from what my wife has told me since she saw the picture, is essential at this point in time to sharpen our

younger, present generation as to what really went on back there in the Second World War, or any war. The government, I think, out on the West Coast did not make a very good decision in sending troops, but thank God that our president was able to do something about the Middle East.

INT: How do you mean was able to do something about the Middle East?

THOUIN: To stop the Arabs and the Jewish people and bring them to an armistice. As shaky as it may be, it's still progress.

INT: I'm curious if after the war you had nightmares or maybe even had to see a counselor.

THOUIN: No I've got a pretty tough ??????that's French Canadian. There's only one time that I can recall, it was when I was specializing in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Utah. We were renting a home that was on the slope of a hill, and the home was set right next to the street and after I'd fallen asleep, around two o'clock in the morning some hot-rodder decided down the slope. And so all I could hear was this whoosh--sounded for all the world like a shell coming in on top of you. I sat bolt upright in bed and actually was shaken, but I was cussing too. That is the only emotional, psychological reaction I have ever experienced. Thank God to my closed-compartment mind.

INT: Do you consider yourself a religious person? And how do the things that you saw effect your belief?

THOUIN: Yes I do. It's stronger than ever. Because, you see going down these narrow French and German roads, snipe~~s~~up in the church tower there and you're sitting in your jeep like a duck in a shooting alley, and more snipers down any store window or any sub-basement window could pick you off so easily there'd be nothing to it. I really should have been killed, conservatively, about 4 times.

And I thank God for that.

INT: If you'd been a prisoner in one of the concentration camps, how do you think that would have affected your faith?

THOUIN: If I had been a prisoner in one of the war camps. . . You see I've always been a leader. I have a silver star, 3 purple hearts, and I told my agitant after the third one "Dammit, knock it off. You make me look like a silly idiot." But the silver star, I was strictly taking my chances. It was written up in the Anaheim Sunday Bulletin. You see the country that we were taking was a former German maneuver area, so they had all of those crossroads pinpointed with beautiful maps. And the Germany????? was a terrible weapon, and it was coming in at that corner at regular intervals. About ten minutes apart. Now I just happened to be going around that corner with my jeep and my driver when I heard somebody yelling "medic". Well if there are no medics around and I'm the only medic in the immediate area, the finger is on me. So we had already pulled over to the side of the road and tried to take what cover we could, but this fellow was still yelling "medic." So I timed it. I waited for one of those 88's to come in, and then I ran like the devil, jumped down into that shellhole, that crater, grabbed ahold of him, pulled him out, got him across the road into where we were being sheltered, and just at that moment another 88 shell came in. So there you see it was a matter of timing, but again I think it was a matter of God's help. I was a firm believer, more and more. And if I were in a prisoner of war camp I'd probably--see my mother always wanted me to be a priest, and I'll bet I'd set up a religious service every sunday just for prayers, having no church affiliation other than the fact of being a battallion surgeon, a captain, it isn't like a ship captain, I can't marry anybody.

INT: I'm curious to know, as you reflect back over the years now. Do you think your experiences, having seen combat during World War II, having seen what you saw when you opened those boxcars. Have they affected your political views or views about events that have happened in America like the Civil Rights Movement, or Viet Nam?

THOUIN: Viet Nam I thought was a hell-of-a poor choice. We should have stayed out of that.

INT: What about things like the Middle East? Has it affected your views?

THOUIN: You see I am for Jewish race, and it reminds me so much of Ireland and England. Why the hell don't they just settle down and live together? But the Irish-Catholics are fighting the English and they're not getting anywhere except killing each other off and on. And I feel very strongly the same thing about Israel and the Arabs. That's a feather, I think, in Jimmy Carter's cap. It's tenuous, certainly, but at least he did it.

INT: Did your experiences affect how you view Germans?

THOUIN: No, because you see I was stationed over there during occupation afterwards since I spoke German ?????? It didn't affect my opinions in regard to the Germany whatsoever. Like I say I was in occupation. In fact it led, frankly, to admiration of the German people. Very very industrious, friendly, and the ????? Very clean people. They could hardly wait to wipe up the mess we'd made over there, and I admired them for it really. There was no, on my part, antagonism towards the Germans. The only antagonism that I had was as I mentioned, the Nazi's, Hitler, the adavistic... the rest of it I said to you.

INT: How did your experiences and what you saw affect your attitudes towards Jews?

THOUIN: I have no prejudices whatsoever. I told you about my two enlisted men. I admired them most deeply. They were gonna take on all of Germany, those two characters, and I'm sure ... To me that typified the Jewish race. They have, again very much like the Germans, they're industrious, they're frugal, they're clean as a whistle, and progressive. What more can you say about a people?

INT: This is sort-of a final question. Do you feel a need in your life as a result of the experiences that you've had, to make sure that things like concentration camps and the events that surrounded them never happen, and if so, are there ways in your occupation or in your politics that you try to express those things?

THOUIN: Well I'm not much of a politician, number one. And if there were any way in which I could impress on the younger generation the horrors of war, including the masochistic tendency of man to perform such animalistic acts as concentration camps, purely because of their race. That is genocide, and brought on by one maniac. Everybody knows who he is. So that one rotten apple can spoil the barrel and all that sort of thing. The younger generation is too intelligent. We are raising an extremely intelligent, you might say progressive younger generation. Much more so, I think, than we ever were. And I can do nothing but to take pride in that we all happen to be a part of it. But as far as the Holocaust goes, they must get it through their heads that there are still existing terrible, masochistic people. People who have only one goal in life, and that is to take advantage of young, and to progress at whatever cost to you or your family or whatever. They are psychopaths, to me.