# United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

## Interview with Peretz Milbauer
## February 20, 1990
## RG-50.030*0162

# PREFACE

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# PERETZ MILBAUER
# February 20, 1990

Q: Can you tell me your name please?

A: My name is Peretz--also known as "Perry"--Milbauer.

Q: And when were you born, and where?

A: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, October 1915.

Q: What were you doing just before the war broke out?

A: I had been teaching for about five (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) and been married for about four years to my lovely wife, Blanche.

Q: What did you do once the war broke out?

A: Uh, I just kept on teaching. I had had a summer job (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) as a counselor in a Jewish camp. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) and uh I had given this up because I knew the draft was coming, and when I was drafted I went willingly.

Q: Where...when, where were you sent overseas and when?

A: Uh, we went overseas on D + 61 in 1944. That would be July. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) Yeah, July.

Q: Tell me what happened when you went overseas?

A: The outfit was (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) first sent to England to assemble its material. It was a combat engineer battalion that was not attached to any particular outfit. It was attached to many different outfits during the war. Uh in my position I rode through England at a breath-taking pace uh delivering the orders for the materials to be ready. The other men from my outfit followed and picked up the uh, not the guns but the uh jeeps, the wagons, the trucks, etc. that we needed for our fighting in France.

Q: What happend then?

A: Uh eventually (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) we went over to Omaha Beach on D + 61. Uh we had gone to England two weeks earlier. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) And we landed in England. We were attached to the 20th Corps of the 3rd Army--which was [Gen. George S.] Patton's Army, and at that time it was very close to the breakthrough by the 3rd Army forces and we we usually during the war attached to an armored division and they were the ones that moved the fastest. And we rode through France at a break-neck pace until

we got to the area (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) in Metz, where we stayed for about a month, six weeks, before we resumed the onslaught on Germany.

Q: And then?

A: Oh, then uh December 5th, we entered Germany. And again we followed uh an armored unit through; and the incidents that uh I uh am really here to tell about uh occurred in April. And uh it was near the town of Waldenburg in East Germany. We were stationed in a little town called Remse: R-E-M-S-E. We had just arrived there that day when uh another GI came over and told me there were three Jews across the street. They were dressed in the striped concentration camp uniform. I went over to them, and I started to speak Yiddish to them. And, oh, were they happy to be able to talk to someone who spoke Yiddish! And they told us some of their stories--uh the same ones that I will tell you about later--and uh we gave them food. We gave them some chocolate and other goodies; uh and they told us where they were from, that just down the road at the next town of Waldenburg there were a group of twenty-two hundred freed concentration victims. Uh there were two thousand women-- mostly from Hungary--approximately, and about two hundred men--mostly from Poland, some Germans. They uh were freed just that morning. They were being driven by a group of SS officers to be used as slave labor uh whenever the Germans were able to make a stand. They slept in the woods at night. When they got up in the morning, the SS officer led the transport to the left. If he had led them to the right, nothing would have happened. He would have been able to keep chasing them. Where we were, we were following the 4th Armored Division, and uh we were actually a spear-head. We were heading towards Chemnitz [**NB:** Karl-Marx-Stadt], in order to capture it. And we were sticking out of the main lines; uh but uh after the uh incidents that I'm going to relay, we received orders to retreat. And we went back a hundred and sixty miles uh west and south, out of the area. Because that was the area that the Potsdam Agreement had allotted to the Russians, and the Russians were on the other side of Chemnitz. We uh waited 'til after supper. I asked an officer to borrow a truck. I told the other soldiers in the outfit where I was going with the truck; and we got food from the kitchens. We got food from packages that the soldiers had received overseas. And we took the truck to the little town of Waldenburg, uh where these uh freed people were. Uh I spoke to them in Yiddish. At first, they were skeptical; but then they uh accepted it. And I started...we started, rather, to give out the things we had brought. And there was such bedlam. There was such fighting. It became uncontrollable. We could uh...they were hungry and they wanted these things that they hadn't seen for many many years. Oh, finally I, we stopped giving it out and uh it was given to the leader of the group who actually did distribute it later. But then I started to talk to the, to refugees who were there, and it it's hard to describe the mixture of happiness and sorrow that they had. Uh they called us belachim (ph)--angels. Uh they said the _____(ph)...the Messiah is here. And one man even said, "We're going to have a new Passover--the day that we got rid of the Nazis." So that was the happiness. But the sorrow. They kept saying, "We are free, but we don't know what freedom means. We don't know what to do with the freedom. We don't understand freedom." As one man put it, he says...holding the whatever he had received, he said, "I haven't had as much in five years. But who can I share it with? I can't go home to my wife and say, 'Look what the Americans

have given me.' I have no one." Besides this mixture of elation and sorrow, I heard the stories that I really already knew about how the Germans had mistreated the uh the Jews that were under their control. They told me, for example, how babies' heads were smashed against walls, the wanton killings that occurred for absolutely no reason at all, just for the sake of killing or for the slightest trivial thing that was done wrong. Uh they spoke about working twelve hours at night, after being up all day; and uh stories of that kind. Uh, I asked people to sign a list of names with relatives they might have had in America, England or Palestine; and I told them that I would send the list overseas. Which I did, eventually. They were reluctant to do it. They weren't sure that this was an honest list. They were afraid--some of them, at least--that some kind of deportation list was being made up. They hadn't overcome the fear that they uh felt. And uh I left. The next night, I came back again; but the atmosphere was entirely different. Instead of about fifteen GIs being there, there were several hundred. And they all brought things for the uh women and men that were there. They were quite safe. Uh the day before, there was a lieutenant for the American government--uh the AMG, the American Military Government there. And I went over, and I spoke to him. I said, "Well, what can you do for these people?" He said, "Well, I'll try and get uh the chairman mayor--the Burgermeister--to give them some food, etc." And uh he said, "It won't do any good. We can't force them, and I'm too busy to really supervise them." But when we came the next day, we discovered they had received a hundred pounds of butter--which I figured out to be a tenth of a pound per person approximately. And uh in addition, the uh rest of the goodies that the uh other GIs had brought. They were quite uh satisfied. They weren't hungry anymore. Uh, so that that solved that problem. I didn't get too many more names, but I did learn a new word the second night. The word müssulman. The man who told me the story told me that a müssulman was someone who was so emaciated, so starved, so shrunken, so skinny that their features became very, very sharp--to the extent that they looked like a mouse. And these were the people that were screened out by the Germans for immediate death, because either they couldn't anymore or soon would not be able to do any labor. It was this man's job to carry the müssulmen who couldn't walk to the crematorium. And he did that; until he finally too became a müssulman. But he was lucky. The doctor there uh was a friend of his, and he helped him. And now the man was pretty husky and pretty strong. He was not a weakling anymore. As a matter of fact, uh most of the people uh in Waldenburg were pretty physically fit; because they had been chosen to be the future laborers wherever the Germans would take them. So in this case, instead of picking the weaklings, the strong ones were picked so that they could be transported and done some work. The list of names that was sent home were sent to my wife, uh who worked for the Yiddish scientific institute--YIVO. The letter arrived on a weekend. She called up the officials of the YIVO; and they immediately went to the office, read my letter, read the list of names, and they issued a press release which was published in the Times and the Jewish Daily Forward and the Aufbau. The Aufbau listed all the names. The other two didn't. And uh the next day, they sat my wife down in the office; and there were many many phone calls from people who were looking. We know that she did contact... She looked in the New York phone books and found one or two people who were listed there; and she called them up and she told them that their relatives were still alive. However, unfortunately, right after that--the next day--uh we were pulled out of Remse. And as I mentioned before, we went back and

down a hundred and sixty miles. And I assume 4th Armored was pulled back, too; and the Russians came in and took over the area and Waldenburg and these refugees. So I had...I had no future information on them. The reason we went south was that we were heading towards the so-called Austrian redoubt. The story was that the Germans were going to make a last stand in the Austrian mountains; and American armies were sent there to be sure that nothing even like that happened. And we went and we moved just as quickly as we had always moved, ending up in a town called Vocklabruck: V-O-C-K-L-A-B-R-U-C-K. I hope I got it right. And uh we were there...we got there on May 5th. Uh V-E day was May 8th[, 1945]. Meanwhile, stories started to sift through about a concentration camp in the area that uh had recently been liberated. The name of the concentration camp was uh Ebensee. Uh, again I borrowed a truck. Didn't take food this time, because our Army was there. But I took along twenty-three soldiers who wanted to go with me. The distance was, I...I recall correctly, about uh twenty miles from where we were. We got to the camp. Uh I got permission, a pass, to visit the crematorium and into the camp. I was amazed. In contrast to the Waldenburg group, all I saw were living skeletons--gaunt people, many of them completely naked. Uh many of them, you couldn't tell whether they were walking dead or walking alive. Their faces were expressionless. Uh, I...I really don't know how to describe it accurately. It...it...it was so different than anything I've every seen. Uh these...well, "walking skeletons" again, walking around. Uh people were lying on the ground--not too many--that seemed to be dead. Uh, I wouldn't know. And uh here, too, I started to speak to the uh people who were in the camp. Uh one told me a story of how uh they performed experiments on women, of the kind that uh we perform on dogs and guineas [pigs]. For example, the sterilization of women. In a different vein, a...one man asked me, "Are the Jews going to Israel?" And I explained the difficulties that the uh people were having getting into Israel. And he says, "Oh, the Germans are such liars! We were told that hoards of Jews were arriving safely in Israel, and I had looked forward to uh getting there." There's also a story that was told of the Germans taking uh Jewish boys and girls, forcing them to get undressed, and forcing them to have sex with each other while they were watching. The girls, I was told, were screaming, "Kill me! Don't do this to me!" But that wouldn't have helped. So uh it just went on, the way I was told. Uh, there were many sick and dying at Ebensee. The American medics were taking care of them. Uh, while I was there, two busloads uh of sick people were transported out of uh Ebensee. But there were any number of others who wanted to be in the bus. It was pitiful to see the bag of bones climbing up the side of the bus. It was a slippery bus; they couldn't stay there. Or climbing on to the top of the bus, in order to be there when the bus went out. They did not get out, because they were taken off the bus--hopefully, to go on another load. We went to the crematorium. The crematorium...and there was no gas chamber. This wasn't a big enough camp. The building had two rooms. One room where the bodies were kept before they were burned. The other room where there was an oven--one oven--that could burn eight people every two hours. This, I was told, was absolutely not enough; and that thousands of dead Jews and other nationalities were buried in the hillside of Ebensee. The...what I'm touching things, the irony was the sign the Germans had put up on the wall. It was a verse, went something like this: "Don't let the worms get my body; better that the fire engulf me, so instead of burying me, burn me. I'm trying to think if there's anything else. Oh, yes. Uh, before the outfit (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) went overseas, uh every uh outfit had

to have an orientation officer to give an explanation as to why we were fighting the war. Having been a history teacher before the war started, I was selected to do that. And among the reasons I gave for our being in...in the war was the inhumanity of the Germans. On the way back from Ebensee--and this could be almost two years later--uh I didn't stop to figure it out. One of the men said, "You know, and when I heard you, I thought it was all propaganda." I had heard the stories already, because I was interested; and I repeated them to the men. And he said, "I thought this was all propaganda." And he says, "Now, I know better." Went back to uh Vocklabruk; and from there, we were wondering whether we would be sent directly to Japan, or go for a leave in the States and then go fight in Japan. But, fortunately, the war ended. And after spending a lot of time in uh...in France in staging camps, uh I was sent back overseas. But meanwhile, the rule in the Army was that if you had a place to sleep, you could get a pass. Because the big problem was lodging. And I happen to have had relatives in Paris and in Belgium. As a matter of fact, uh I bugged the officer so much about going to Paris or Belgium that even at the height of the Battle of the Bulge, when the fighting was going on, they went to get their liquor rations. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) And they came in at seven o'clock in the morning, and said, "Milbauer, you want to go to Brussels?" I said, "Yes!" "Be ready in fifteen minutes." And we went to Brussels during the Battle of the Bulge. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) And uh from my uh camps in France I went to Paris several times. I went to Belgium again, because that was the...I had the lodging with my family. Uh, I used to bring food to my family in Paris. Uh I couldn't to Brussels, because we were all in one little jeep. But again, I was able to borrow a truck and bring food to the Paris family. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) Interestingly enough, uh my family story has a happier ending than some of the previous stories that I told you. Uh, it was not a small family; but everyone survived, uh most with an interesting story to tell. In Paris, uh my uncle by marriage, [Franz Van Manhut (ph)] was a painter, professional painter. He had at least one picture that the Louvre bought. He kept his wife in the basement for the whole war. She never went out, so she was not bothered. As a matter of fact, in my house I still have a mint yellow _____(ph) that was never sewn on any piece of clothing. It was hers. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) He had two daughters and a son. The youngest children--Esther and Daniel--they had baptismal papers for, so they had no problem. Judith entered the underground. Uh, her first job was to deliver the ration coupons to the people who were in hiding that were stolen by the underground. And people had to eat every week, every month. They had to have the coupons. So whenever they could, they would steal them. It was her job to go from place to place, distribute them. The French police... No, not the French police--I'm sorry. The Germans uh tried to arrest her in a subway train, but the Frenchmen made such a commotion that she was able to escape. And she went up to Brussels, where the rest of the family was; and there she became a member of the Resistance, a particular group that made it their business to save Jewish children. And they saved four thousand Jewish children during the uh war. Her code name was Piron: P-I-R-O-N. A movie has been made which is called As If It Were Yesterday, which describes the workings of this group. And she was interviewed for this movie. Another cousin, Helene, was called to the assembly area from which she was going to be deported. Instead of going there, she went into the hospital and had her appendicitis taken out. When she finally had to leave the hospital, she married a gentile. And this is called a

white marriage. And because she was married to a gentile, in Belgium she wasn't called anymore. Uh I have a cousin, Henri, in Belgium, who is a native born Belgian. He was in the Belgian Army. He was captured after only sixteen days of fighting; and he ended up in Hamburg after being in seven different prison camps. He survived the bombing of Hamburg, which was pretty severe and did hit some of the camps. Uh he later went to work for the Belgian government. Uh there's uh another uncle--uh, Uncle Joseph-- who joined the French Army as a uh volunteer. He too was captured, and he ended up with Stalag 17. Uh he's written a number of French books. He's a published poet; and there are some poems about Stalag 17 in his uh books. He got sick in the prison camp, was repat...repatriated back to France, immediately joined the resistance. And after a while, he was denounced. And in the nick of time he managed to escape across the Pyrenees and finally ended up in Palestine. Another uncle by marriage, David Lara, worked for one of the newspapers in Belgium. And he was very strongly anti-Nazi before the Nazis came. And as soon as they were close or after...just after they came - I don't know which - he too escaped across the Pyrenees, to uh America; and his wife followed him uh not too long thereafter. Uh there's one more relative that I seem to have forgotten. Oh, yes--a cousin by marriage who was a captain in the Maquis in the Vichy area. After the war--I don't know exactly how this happened--he and some of his followers surrounded one of the grand houses in Paris. It's a big house, I was there. Uh, and uh they just took it over. And he lived there for a number of years, until his business went bad and he had to give it up. Uh I think that's the story. I mean, I...to the best of my ability.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

A: Yeah. Uh, I tried to get everything in. Uh (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION) I can't, I told you the story of the YIVO. I really can't think of anything else. (TECHNICAL CONVERSATION).

Q: Thank you.

A: You're very welcome.