

Oral History Interview with Mr. Donald Butler in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania August 21, 2012¹

sound file WMA 30011: 1 hour 15 minutes 52 seconds

sound file WMA 30012: 2 minutes 44 seconds (photo identification)

Donald Butler was born in Pittsburgh in 1919. His parents, observant Orthodox Jews, were married outside of Pittsburgh. His father ran a Kosher meat business. His parents were concerned about taking care of others in the Jewish community, and he received a religious education. After attending public school and graduating from Taylor Alderdice High School, he and his brother opened a business that took care of the Playbill Programs distributed for theatrical and musical productions in Pittsburgh.

[Dates are not clear and the sequence of events in the interview does not seem to correspond to what was written in his letter to his fiancée and notes he saved from his work with refugees in Italy.] It would seem that Mr. Butler was called up sometime after November, 1942, because Morocco seems already to have been liberated when he arrived. He said he received only 6 weeks of infantry training and he seemed to think he was not prepared to fight. He mentioned a training camp in Virginia (?), a place that sounds like “Camp Teletwinsky”. He and his regiment were sent to Morocco on the British troop ship, the “Empress of Scotland”.

He mentions the name of the Protestant Army Chaplain, Eccles. He was assigned to be vice-chaplain and took care of religious observance for the Jewish soldiers. It seems he was in Casablanca and then was stationed elsewhere.

Mr. Butler remembers being welcomed by the Jewish community in Algeria, especially the widow of the Consul in Oran, Judith Toledano. He marvels at the warm reception the Jews of Morocco and Algeria gave American soldiers.

Mr. Butler took part in the Allied invasion of Italy. He seems to have been present at the Battle of Montecino. He was stationed in Florence, then Rome.

In his memory, Eccles gave him special leave from North Africa to go to Palestine, but in the letter he sent his fiancée, Chantze, later to become his wife, the trip started in Italy in 1945.²

He mentions the names of many Jewish army chaplains, who were in Palestine when he was there. It seems a group left together. He mentions Reznikoff, Baumel, Jacob Hockmann, who was assigned to the Chief Rabbi of Oran, Herzog. He mentions Chaplain Honig, with whom he worked in Sidi Bel Abbès, in Algeria.

Mr. Butler landed in Payne Field in Cairo and was so impatient to get to Palestine, he was given a car and a driver and crossed the desert in 4 days. His memories of this trip were joyful. Since he abided strictly by Jewish dietary laws, he had more or less gone hungry for most of his time in the service until he got to Palestine.

Returning to Italy, he continued working with UNRHA. Mr. Butler was given an office to receive Jewish camp survivors arriving in Florence, then Rome. He was deeply troubled by the stories these

¹ Recorded on an Olympus hand-held recorder

Apple Photo Booth computer program used for visual recording. The sound was not audible.

²The typed letter was illustrated and made into an album by his four children and their families to honor Mr. Butler's 90th birthday. The USHMM Library was given a copy and the scans accompany this interview.

survivors told and he has saved the notes he jotted down at the time. It seems that he continued serving in Italy after May 8, 1945. His wife remembers his return to the States: January 1, 1946.

Commenting on some of the pictures he saved from that period, he speaks about the Jews of Italy. Apparently, the Chief Rabbi Zolli, converted to Catholicism. He mentions a rabbi, David Prato, who was a friend of Mussolini and who collected gold and jewels, money and property from the Jews to appease the fascist government. He took refuge in Palestine, but was called back to Rome when Israel Zolli, who was hidden at the Vatican, became a Catholic.³

Mr. Butler gives some interesting information concerning the role played by Mayor Lawrence of Pittsburgh in convincing Haiti to vote in favor of the creation of the State of Israel at the U.N. in 1948.

³ There is a photo of Donald Butler in uniform sitting at a table in Ostia, Italy, while Rabbi Prato is making a speech.