

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Jerome Stasson (Stashevsky)
March 21, 1994
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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Lisa Grau, National Court Reporters Association.

JEROME STASSON (STASHEVSKY)
March 21, 1994

Question: The following is an interview of Jerome Stasson. It is being conducted on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on March 21, 1994.

What is your full name?

Answer: My name is Jerome Stasson. Used to be Stashevsky.

Q: And where were you born?

A: I was born in Detroit, Michigan.

Q: When was that?

A: In 1922.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family. Who made up your family?

A: Well, I have a brother, Israel Stashevsky, who now resides in Israel, Sasa; Kibbutz, SasA: And then I have a sister, Geraldine Leavitt, who resides in Farmington Hills, Michigan. And we always have been active in Jewish causes. As a matter of fact, my sister right now has a television program for Shaarey Zedek Synagogue in Southfield, Michigan.

Q: What what were your parents' names?

A: My parents' names were Bernard, my father, and my mother was Sylvia or Shindoll? as she was called.

Q: And what kind of neighborhood did you grow up in?

A: Grew up in a middleclass neighborhood in Detroit. I went to the schools, same neighborhood, same area and neighborhood. The schools were Rosa Durfee and Central High School.

Q: Did you have nonJewish neighbors as well as Jewish neighbors?

A: It was generally Jewish area where I grew up.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: My father was a salesman. He sold originally paper bags, and then he went into other items, just to local stores and so forth.

Q: How religiously observant was your family?

A: My grandfather was very observant.

Q: What was his name?

A: His name was Pinkus Stashevsky.

Q: Where did he come from?

A: And he came from Poland, also. And he attended synagogue, and became quite important in synagogue, congregation Shaarey Zedek, in Detroit.

Q: And did you have any Hebrew school training?

A: Yes, I had Hebrew school. We had Hebrew schools in our area, and through high school.

Q: Did you belong to any Jewish youth groups?

A: I guess not as well my brother had done, because I got interested in music, and so I sort of headed in that direction. My brother was a member of the show Maier Hot Saier, and of course, that was one of the reasons that he is now in Israel in a Kibbutz.

Q: All right. So you completed high school.

A: Completed high school.

Q: And then what happened?

A: And then about two years or three years later, I was drafted.

Q: What did you do after high school?

A: I had a few jobs, and in clerking, and I started to play more, you know, professionally. I'm a violinist, and did things like that.

Q: So you were living at home?

A: Still living at home.

Q: And working and playing the

A: Right.

Q: violin?

A: Right.

Q: And when were you drafted?

A: In early 1943.

Q: And what?

A: I went into the Army. Originally it was into the Infantry, and later, because of my music, I was transferred out of the Infantry outfit into another one where they needed a musician for a string quartet.

Q: Where was this located at this point?

A: This was in South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. A: And then we went overseas quite quickly, just before the invasion.

Q: When did you where did you go when you

A: We went to England.

Q: And when did you arrive there?

A: Just before the invasion of Europe, and then we went immediately over into France.

Q: Okay. And can you describe what happened from that point on?

A: Well, in the few days after the invasion, we arrived at Normandy, and then we went right through those battles, you know. I have five battles that we took took part in.

Q: And what specific unit were you in?

A: Well, I was with at that time I was with Headquarters Company, so I did at first, I was in the Dynamiting Company, and then I was transferred out of that, and I was just attached to Headquarters Company of the 59th Signal Battalion.

Q: And what was your role then?

A: My role was as Headquarters Company was, first of all, I I took care of records, one of the jobs, and I also was like a messenger with different trips.

Q: And you said you were in five battles?

A: Right.

Q: Do you remember the names?

A: Well, it was all the European battles.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: We just followed General Patton from the start of after he took over, and went through Europe.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Until we got to Germany.

Q: Okay. And then you arrived in Germany?

A: Right.

Q: What was your first what's your first recollection, your first memory?

A: Of Germany?

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Hah.

Q: I mean, here you were a Jewish soldier coming to Germany. Do you remember what your feelings were at that time?

A: You know, everything we didn't know too much about what was happening. And that was one of the things that was so shocking when we arrived in Buchenwald. But we weren't told in those days really what was happening.

Now, we had heard rumors of what was happening; that they were killing Jews and so forth. Even before I went into the Army, we had gotten rumors of that, things like that happening, but nobody was really sure, you know. There was no everything was kept quiet. So when we got into Germany, of course, it was a matter of just getting through and fighting and going through these battles. There was no time to think of things like that until we until we got to the camp of Buchenwald.

Q: What was first impression? What's the first thing you saw

A: In Buchenwald?

Q: when you got there?

A: Well, I guess we were one of the first units into Buchenwald. And I remember standing just inside the entrance, and having the feeling of not only horror, but utter desolation. What I saw was on my left, was a mass of dead bodies piled about eight feet high, and stretching out maybe 30 or 40 yards. The bodies had been soaked kerosene, ready to be burnt, but I guess we arrived too soon for them to do it. On my right, there were several people that were lying there, and some of them were crawling. Some weighed 80 pounds. Some looked half dead to me. One of them was crawling towards

me, and I said something in Yiddish. I can't remember for sure, but "Vus Kenneth Tuin Zick Sehelthen, (ph)" and one of them came up and tried to kiss my feet. The feeling of helplessness and not believing was very prevalent. The gentile soldiers who were with me were almost in tears and shaking their heads. And I remember one of the survivors coming up and telling me that the Polish SS had run out the back of the camp, and they were getting away. And then later, one of the our soldiers, who had gone back there, said that two of them had been caught by some of the inmates and killed. The scene that I described to you has never left my memory. And when I hear some of these groups that are now prevalent in the United States, around the world, that say that this never happened, this really prevailed on me to tell what I saw, because I will never forget it.

We left this area soon after. I guess we had another assignment. And it was a long time ago, 50 years or so. I don't remember what that assignment was between you and me. But that scene that I saw at the entrance will never be forgotten, and I felt that I had to describe it.

Q: Do you know what day you arrived there?

A: I wouldn't know the date, but I know that Patton was 20 or 30 miles ahead of us. He had come through, and then gone on. He was always ahead of the other units.

And so that was really probably the exact date that Buchenwald was liberated. Because the fact that the SS troops that were still there, and they had tried to, you know, get rid of that evidence, so it was not more than one or two days difference.

Q: And you said you had no preparation for what you would be seeing here?

A: No preparation.

Q: You were a young man.

A: No preparation.

Q: You were in your early 20s

A: Right.

Q: with no preparation?

A: No preparation of this at all.

And not it was a situation that we really didn't believe. Not only me, but everybody that walked in with me, you know, at that time.

Q: Were you with other Jewish soldiers?

A: No. There were Jewish soldiers in our outfit, but I think I was the only one at that point that had walked into this.

Q: How big a group were you?

A: Oh, there must have been 10 or 12 of us.

Q: And you walked into the camp?

A: We went into that camp.

Q: Are there any other experiences that you had besides talking in Yiddish to the one survivor?

A: No, because after we did survey this area, we were told we have to get out; that other people were coming in to do something to

Q: Would

A: work with the survivors, and

Q: How long were you actually inside Buchenwald?

A: Maybe not more than a half hour.

Q: So what was the purpose of you going? What did they tell you the purpose was for you?

A: They just wanted to...

Q: Witness it?

A: Witness, as witnesses, right, to see what was going on. And then we our whole outfit moved out after that, and then that was it.

Q: And you had described one young man's reaction. Any other reactions that you remember from the other soldiers?

A: Just disbelief. I think nobody ever would have thought of seeing things like that.

Now, I remember our outfit had gone through five battles, so we had seen many things. But this was the horror of it and the immensity of it, you know, was hard to understand.

Q: How much of the camp did you see? Did you walk around?

A: Not maybe we went in 40 or 50 yards, and then returned, went back.

Q: And do you feel that because you were Jewish, that your reaction was different than your fellow soldiers?

A: I don't think so. I think that they were also in shock; that they didn't believe this could happen. Man's inhumanity to man.

Q: Did you see any of the living quarters, the barracks?

A: We saw barracks. We didn't go into them, but they were

Q: Can you describe what you saw; what you remember?

A: They were like wooden barracks, but they were run down if I remember correctly, and it was small areas where they were living. I did see that.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Tiny, tiny areas where they had lived, little probably not even beds, you know, but probably on the floor.

Q: So you just walked around on your own?

A: Yeah. We walked in on our own, and then we were told let's go, we're moving out, and that was it.

Q: Did you talk about what you saw with the other men that you were with, the ten other men?

A: No. We went into another assignment, and we had we were spread out, so I didn't get to talk to too many people. Later, we talked about it, you know, and really, what I'm telling you, we talked among ourselves, you know.

Q: Did you discuss any of this with any of the officers in the camp, in the Army?

A: One of the officers, if I remember, was with us when we went in, but we didn't discuss that afterwards, because things were still popping, as you know, because that wasn't the end of the war.

Q: And you said you spoke Yiddish to one of the

A: Right.

Q: survivors?

A: Right.

Q: And did you speak to any of the other survivors, or just that one?

A: No. It seemed to me if I remember correctly, that was the one. The others were couldn't speak. They were mostly I was thinking afterwards, I wonder if they really survived, because they looked in such bad shape that probably many of them didn't.

Q: So you then left, and can you just briefly tell us what happened after?

A: Well, we would we had to go on. And after that, it's hard to remember what happened. I remember carrying one message to a Russian general in Lavesig that, and forgetting to shake his hand, and he was left hanging there as I left the room.

And finally, after a few months, the war was did finish.

Q: And then you

A: But I did write about this.

Q: Well, let's

A: Yes.

Q: So then you how much longer were you in the service?

A: Probably not more than a few more months.

Q: And

A: Before I left.

Q: And then you came back?

A: Came back to

Q: Michigan?

A: To Michigan.

Q: And what did you do then?

A: Okay. Then I went to I decided that I would go and really take music more seriously, and I went to college, and became a music teacher and a music performer. Met my wife, Betty, who is also a musician, and that's what we've been doing since.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: To this day.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit about how this experience that you went through in Buchenwald as a young man, a young soldier affected you. Does it still affect you?

A: Hmm. I would imagine it does, 'cause the immensity of what I saw, and the fact that I was there, of course. And I had been telling not only my family, but other people, whoever I saw, or whoever was interested of these things that I had that it was hard to talk about. But when I first came back, people wanted to know. I remember writing to my family even from Europe of what I saw.

Q: Describing

A: Describing what I saw. And I did that.

Q: Do you still have those letters?

A: No, no. What happened was my mother used to read those letters, and finally and cry whenever she read them. So finally, I decided that get rid of them. And now I realize that was a mistake. I shouldn't have. But I did. I got rid of them.

Q: Did you take any photographs of what you saw when you

A: Yes. We had some photographs.

Q: That you yourself

A: But those photographs were included in some of the letters, and so I got rid of those, too.

Q: Uhhuh. But you yourself had a camera?

A: No. We had I had a camera, but I didn't take all those. There were other soldiers that did take photographs, and they gave me some of the prints that they got. That's where I got them.

Q: You had said you had written or was that the letter you're talking about, the letters that you wrote home?

A: Right.

Q: You didn't write anything formal?

A: Well, no, I didn't write anything formal.

Q: Formally?

A: No.

Q: How did that experience that you went through affect your feelings about being Jewish?

A: Well

Q: Did it change the way you feel?

A: No, I don't think it changed. Our family has you know, is a family that had many Jewish clergy in it. My mother's family, on her side, there were Rabbis that went back as far as four generations. I think we came from Spain, and then to Poland, and so I

remember stories about, you know, great, great, great grandfather being Rabbis and so on.

So I've always felt Jewish. I don't think it had any affect on it. But it sure opened my eyes about what had been going on, and why, and why this happened was a big question; why it was allowed to happen. Because I think now as we read books and go back into history that many people knew what was going on, and nothing not enough was done to save these people.

Q: Did the Army have any mechanism for the soldiers to talk out their experiences of what they saw

A: No.

Q: at places like Buchenwald?

A: No, not not that I know of. Perhaps, you know, other units that moved in to try to work with these people may have had that, but we were not given that, you know, responsibility; or nobody ever talked to us about it after that.

Q: Were most of the other men that you came to the camp with young like you?

A: Yes, just about my age, maybe a little bit older.

Q: And you said that you did talk about it with them a little bit after?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember any of the exchanges that you've had; any of their comments?

A: Same thing that I that I talked told you. First of all, there was disbelief. And nobody ever said that they would have imagined the immensity of this terrible horror that we saw. And to think that these people and in every contact that we had with German people, they always said that it wasn't us that did these horrible things. We were not Nazis. But it turns

Q: When you say contact, when was this contact?

A: Well, if we talked to a German person.

Q: Over you're talking about when you were

A: Yeah, as we went from, you know

Q: Towns?

A: Citytocity, towntotown, and we naturally would say did you know about what was happening. Your town was right next to this; the ovens there. They all said, oh, no, we

didn't know. We were not Nazis. But it turned out [many|am] times, they were. We found evidence of Nazi materials in their attics and so on. Everybody denied it.

Q: What kind of what did you do after you left Buchenwald? You said you went to different towns and cities. What was your role?

A: Okay. Since I was a Jewish soldier, I knew a little Yiddish, I sort of became the billeting person. In other words, I would go around talking to people to allow soldiers to stay in different places. And that's what I mean when I had contact with the regular persons in these towns.

Q: And what was their reception to you knowing

A: Oh, fine.

Q: that you were Jewish?

A: No, it didn't matter. They were just glad to see Americans, you know. Oh, we're glad to see you.

Q: And they knew you were Jewish?

A: Sure, because I talked Jewish. I'm sure German people

Q: Right, right.

A: The German people could tell the difference between German and

Q: You were speaking Yiddish and

A: I was speaking Yiddish, and they were answering in German, right. And usually I would go to the Bürgermeister, because he was the one that went, tell us, tell us where we could find a billeting, you know.

Q: Well, is there anything else that you wanted to add; that you wanted to say

A: Well

Q: about your experiences?

A: it was heartrending, as you can hear, and I just I hope that I what I've said, you know, can verify what, you know, what has what happened over there. And as an eyewitness, I thought that I should have some evidence, you know, to that effect, and tell that this did happen, and it wasn't a hoax. And it was horrible.

Q: Well, thank you very much for telling us your story.

A: Okay. I'm happy I'm able to do that. It wasn't easy, but I felt we felt it was important.

Q: As you said, this is something that has stayed with you.

A: Right. Especially the scene in the entrance of the camp.

Q: Were there any special signs that you saw?

A: There was a sign above the camp, but you know, I can't remember what it said now. Some of the movies I've seen, there had been different slogans, Arbeit? You know about that. Means what was it.

Q: Arbeitsdorf?

A: Yeah, right. But I don't really remember if it said that in Buchenwald. It might have. It might have.

Q: And that was the only camp that you went to?

A: That was the only camp we went to. We were near I had heard that we were passing by different ones, or there were, you know, as we went through, because we had just followed the line of the tanks, but we didn't we didn't go to another camp. That was it. So I don't know what happened in Dachau, for example, or others. Just what I saw in Buchenwald. One thing I do remember is that upon entrance into Buchenwald, not only was it the visual horror, but we had that terrible odor of dead bodies and kerosene, and it was it was an odor that made us all nauseous. A terrible feeling of nauseousness and utter desolation. And this happened, again, at the entrance of this camp.

Q: And the other soldiers felt the way you do?

A: Yes. The other soldiers felt the way I did. And as a matter of fact, now that I think back, I remember one of the other soldiers not being able to stay there. He had to leave immediately. But I did not do that, because I wanted to see as much as I could.

Q: Why?

A: Because I'm Jewish, and I didn't want to, you know, forget what I was seeing. I thought maybe some day in the future, I'll be able to describe this, or I would have to describe it, which I am now doing. Another experience that I had later in our area, area of Southfield, Michigan at the time, is we met a survivor of that camp. He happened to be a jeweler who came to our house to show a small, little charm bracelet that we were trying thinking of getting for our twoyear old daughter at the time. Now, this was over 30 years ago.

But when he had heard that I went into the camp and was a liberator, he said you know, I was a survivor of Buchenwald, too. And the only way I survived was I finally cut off some toes in order to get to a hospital. And he was very emotional. We hugged, and he cried. And he said you, you saved us. And this happened, the meeting happened 30, over

30 years ago. And we see each other once in a while, and memories come back, of course.

Q: And this was

A: On both sides.

Q: And this was an emotional experience for you?

A: Well, as you can tell, it was very emotional, because he started to talk a little bit about his experiences in the camp, although not much. So I met in other words, I did meet a one of those people who was there when I walked into that camp.

Q: Thank you for telling us that very moving story. This concludes the interview of Jerome Stasson. It was conducted on March 21, 1994 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Conclusion of Interview