

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Thomas B. Gardiner  
August 24, 1997  
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## PREFACE

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Transcribed by Michelle Keegan, National Court Reporters Association.

**THOMAS B. GARDINER**  
**August 24, 1997**

Question: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Thomas Gardiner, conducted by Margaret Garret on August 24, 1997, in Washington, D.C., Tape 1, Side A. What was your name at birth?

Answer: Thomas Brown Gardiner.

Q: And what was the date of your birth?

A: March 26th, 1920.

Q: And the place of birth?

A: St. Louis County, Missouri.

Q: Could you talk about your childhood?

A: Well, perhaps. I was born just two months before my father passed away and was raised by my widowed mother, along with two sisters and a brother. We grew up during the Depression and unemployment times and all of those things. We were a happy family led by a devoted Christian mother. And there was nothing terribly unusual. I guess we were probably a typical Depression family. I went to school through the first year of high school and then due to economic problems and so forth I had to drop out of school. And we moved to a small -- very small farm down in the Ozarks, near Salem, Missouri. I lived there two years and then moved back to St. Louis and were able to find some employment. And that was in 1935, I believe.

Q: So you were 15 then?

A: I was 15. Yes, ma'am.

## Interview with Thomas Gardiner

4

Q: And you were working, at 15?

A: I went to work at age 15 as a helper for a painter and paper hanger, and then when I left his employ I went to work for a newspaper carrier delivering papers via old Model T Ford truck. And then I was working for \$0.10 an hour in both jobs, I think. And then in 1936 midyear I went to work for a manufacturing company at age 16 out in a suburb of St. Louis. And I worked for that company for 16 years and worked up through an apprenticeship and became a certified tool and die maker. And then I went to work for another company as a tool and die maker. And then I -- During this time I was going to trade schools and night courses at Washington University and other vocational schools in the St. Louis area. I changed to a job as an engineering assistant and a product designer, attending more and more night school and so on. I took a correspondence course in electronics and operated a part-time radio-television repair business during the early '50s. I was married in 1940 to my wife Rachel, to whom I'm still happily married 57 years later. And I changed jobs after another 14, 15 years. I held about four jobs, I guess, four or five jobs in my lifetime and worked my way up into semi-executive position. Again, a happy career, a very interesting career. And we've had a very, very happy, sometimes turbulent life. With God's help, we always kept it all together.

Q: Now, backing up, what led up to your going into the Army?

A: I was 26 years old at the time, and they were getting ready for the invasion of Europe and the D-Day invasion.

Q: Now, you were born in 1920?

A: 1920. No. I was 24. I'm sorry. I went in in 1944.

## Interview with Thomas Gardiner

5

Q: When you were 24?

A: When I was 24.

Q: And were you drafted, or how --

A: Yes, I was drafted. I had a responsible position and had had a couple of deferments. But at the time I was drafted and they were getting ready for the invasion, anybody under age 26 that was healthy, there was no more deferments.

Q: What was your position when you were deferred?

A: Well, I was a tool and die maker and engineer assistant. I was -- our company was doing some very precise and important war work, and I was a nighttime supervisor.

Q: Do you know exactly what your company was manufacturing?

A: Well, we manufactured some small parts for the M1 rifle. And I designed the tools and built them for that job. We were making a lot of plug gauges and ring gauges for the cartridge -- for rifle and pistol cartridge cases. The small-arms plant in St. Louis was manufacturing the product, and we were making tools and gauges for them.

Q: So you were very directly involved in production for the war?

A: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

Q: So in 1944 when you were 24, you were drafted?

A: Right.

Q: And where did you go?

A: I went through Jefferson Barracks, was held there a couple of weeks and in the hopes that they would have a request for some Army engineer candidates or something like that. But all they were getting was requests for infantry replacements. So after a couple of

weeks I was shipped down to IRTC training camp by -- let's see. It was Camp Robinson, Arkansas, down by Little Rock. And I was in a training program there for 17 weeks. And then I was given a short delay in route and then shipped over to England and went across the channel in -- I think it was probably September of '44 -- I'm not terribly sure now. August, September. And I was held in replacement camp in England for a while and then sent to -- across the channel to a front area replacement camp in France.

Q: Do you remember where in France?

A: I think it was a town called Epinal, E-P-I-N-A-L, I believe.

Q: Okay.

A: And from that point then I was assigned to the 45th Infantry Division. And we had -- I think I joined that division a day or two before or maybe a week, I don't know, before Thanksgiving. And we had early Thanksgiving dinner at the camp or wherever we were. We were in reserve then. And then we went up into the action into the Vosges Mountains and Alsace-Lorraine.

Q: So that was the first action that you ever saw?

A: Right.

Q: And could you say a little bit about that experience?

A: Well, I guess I couldn't say anything good about it. I was fortunate. We saw some -- quite a bit of action during that fall and winter, in the spring. But I was fortunate. I never received a wound in combat at all. The only wound I received was at one time when we were off the lines picking up replacements, and I had a bazooka blow up in my face, knock me down. And I didn't even qualify for a Purple Heart. I was blessed.

Q: What was your injury at that time?

A: I had a lot of powder burns on my face. It stunned me. When I picked myself up, I had blood all over my face. But like I said, I was fortunate. It really didn't do a permanent injury. I had some scars that showed here for a while, but I suppose they're gone.

Q: Were you out of action for a while?

A: No.

Q: You just kept going?

A: Just kept going. We had been pulled off the lines for a few days to pick up some new replacements. The 45th Infantry Division had a lot of casualties throughout the war. And they were one of the divisions -- the first divisions, as I understood it, over in South Africa. And then they came all the way up through Sicily and Italy and southern France. And of course, I had joined them way up in northern France up in Alsace-Lorraine. They had seen a lot heavier action before I even joined the unit.

Q: So how did that period end?

A: Well, our unit was -- I don't know exactly how to -- We were up in the mountains on the 7th Army front at the time that the so-called Battle of the Bulge took place over on another front. And our unit as well as some of the other units had to pull back from the position we were in because we were being surrounded. We spent Christmas Day or Christmas Eve up in the foxholes up there. And we were actually I think had crossed over into Germany. And then just a day or two or a short time after Christmas, we had to pull back during the night and take new positions further back. A short time after that -- and this gets real fuzzy there -- I was sent back to headquarters, suffering from battle fatigue.

I was all stove up with, I guess, arthritis or something. We had been in the snow and the water and everything up there. And during the time that I was -- the days that I was back, three or four days, I guess, my unit was actually cut off and captured or killed by the Germans. I'll never know why I was spared that. But as a result of this, our unit -- I think our whole battalion and parts of another battalion were rendered inoperative, I guess you'd say. A lot of the men were taken prisoner. We were pulled back then and attached to some other units. And I don't know -- I don't remember what units. But then we were reorganized, and still then the 157th Infantry, Colonel Sparks was still our battalion commander. And we then started to move forward --

Q: Excuse me. I'm going to move the microphone a little closer. Okay.

A: We started moving rapidly then into Germany. This is during the latter days of the war then. We were traveling on tanks and other vehicles and heading across -- I don't remember. I think they call it the Saar Valley, but I'm not now of that. Some country plains in that farmland probably. We participated in the capture of Schaffenburg, which was an industrial town; Nuremberg; and then moved -- our next objective then was Munich. And as Colonel Sparks' narrative in the one book that I was reading down in the library, it was on our way to objective in Munich that the division came across the Dachau Concentration Camp.

Q: So by then, you had seen quite a bit of combat.

A: Enough. Enough.

Q: Okay. So your next objective was Dachau?

A: Yes.



Q: Or Munich. I'm sorry.

A: Our next objective was Munich. However, we were diverted then to liberate the Dachau. And I think, as I mentioned earlier, our sister company -- our battalion was given the objective of liberating the camp. Our sister company, "I" Company was in -- went to actually -- they were one of the first into the camp. "L" Company, which I was in, moved on in to occupy the town of Dachau. And then we were -- as soon as they saw the situation there and --

Q: The situation in the camp?

A: In the camp. -- and the seriousness of it and all, then as I understand it our Munich objective was delayed and the colonel was told to fully liberate the camp and guard it until the military police could come in.

Q: So what specifically did you experience in the liberation of the camp?

A: Well, like I say, it was a few hours or the next morning after the gates were crashed that our company was pulled in there. We were billeted in some apartment buildings outside of the camp where the Nazi officers had lived. And we were put on guard shifts -- I don't remember -- several hours at a time inside of the camp and around the camp was -- orders for no one to go in or out. There was a lot of typhus in the camp. There was all kinds of sickness. My understanding -- and my numbers may or may not be right. But my understanding was that at the time we got there there were about 17,000 prisoners in the camp and that they were dying at the rate of about 300 a day. They didn't -- obviously didn't want them out in the countryside. So while I was in there doing guard duty, we talked whenever possible. A lot of the prisoners in there would come up

to our guard post and want to talk. They were overjoyed. And they would tell their personal stories.

Q: Now, what language were they speaking?

A: Well, some of them could speak English, but some of them were strictly speaking their German or Polish or whatever.

Q: Did you understand any of the --

A: At that time, I could understand some German.

Q: How did you know German?

A: Just from picking it up and talking to people and prisoners.

Q: So from being in the military?

A: Yeah, right. I never studied German. No, ma'am.

Q: Okay.

A: One or two of the prisoners then insisted on taking myself and another buddy for a tour of the barracks where they were -- where they slept in these boxes that the pictures all show. I guess had we known then about all this typhus and everything, we probably wouldn't have gone. But anyway, they took us through there and they took us through the --

Q: Excuse me. Your hands are making a noise. I'm sorry.

A: I'm sorry. I'm a little nervous, I guess. Took us through the barracks. Of course, there was a lot of the prisoners still in the boxes. Took us through the shower room where we saw these emaciated men being given showers and taking showers. We then went back to our guard posts. And this sort of thing was repeated for several days. And I think we were

there four days altogether. And we had some interesting and some sad stories. There was one man came up to me and was speaking English. And come to find out, he had been a musician with one of the Dorsey bands, and he had gone over to Germany to settle a family estate or something and he'd been captured. Now, whether he was Jewish or not, I'm not sure.

Q: He was American?

A: He was an American, but a musician. But anyway, he -- of course he was wanting to tell us his story. And he was really overjoyed because he had family back here. But some of the sad stories. One young Polish boy tell me in -- I guess in broken German, English, whatever -- we understood it -- that saw his parents butchered in front of his eyes. And another one told us about seeing the Nazis take these infant babies and throw them up in the air and shoot at them. Things of that sort. That's where it's hard to visualize, really, anything or anybody being that animalistic, really.

Q: Let's go back to what you actually saw yourself. When you went into the camp the first day, did you go in with other men on a truck?

A: Uh-hmm. Went in -- probably marched in. I'm not sure of that. And then what we saw, of course, was the bodies laying out by the fence such as in that picture.

Q: Now, could you describe the picture? Because this is just an audiotape.

A: Okay. Well, here on the back of this picture it describes just a few of the bodies which had been carried out of the barracks, dead, and not hauled to the crematorium yet. And these bodies were just laid out like sticks of wood out by the high barbed wire fence, and they were waiting to be burned.

Q: Now, this is a photograph that you took?

A: This is a photograph that -- yes, with a camera that I had taken from a prisoner.

Q: From a German?

A: From a German soldier prisoner. Yes. And these bodies were just almost like skeletons. And then there was a boxcar on the siding, probably more than one boxcar. I don't recall. But there were bodies still piled in there that had been -- the Germans brought these people from some other camps that didn't have crematoriums, and they hauled them there and then they burned them. This photo is one of the boxcars with the side door open. Here is another photo of that. And after we got in and were given duty assignments, we were given a tour by some of the prisoners which included the -- they showed us the gas chambers where they lined up the concentration prisoners and had them undress and go through the -- what they thought was going to be a shower, a delousing shower. And they marched them into these gas chambers and gassed them. And then right in the room next to the gas chambers was a large room that had the bodies just thrown helter-skelter, just mounted up like cord wood, again waiting to be burned in the furnaces which were in an adjacent part of that building. The fires were still going at that time because they were -- I suppose it was important to dispose of these bodies that were diseased and had died of disease.

Q: So after the gates were opened, the bodies were still being cremated?

A: So far as I remember it was, yes. That's a detail I don't remember for sure. I'm pretty confident they were because the fires were still burning and the bodies were piled up. There would have been probably more disease, danger and all. Well, I don't know. I

guess that's that and our visions of the barracks and talking with the people.

Q: Let's go back to what you were doing. You marched into the camp. And what was the next thing that happened to you?

A: I'm not terribly sure, ma'am.

Q: Well, you said that you were on guard duty.

A: Well, yes. We were -- I don't know whether they took us in through the gates immediately or whether we marched to the outside and then were farmed up and assigned duty or what. I don't recall. But I know that within a matter of minutes or hours of our arrival, we were actually inside of the camp.

Q: So your guard post was inside the camp?

A: Yes, ma'am. Most of them were. There was some I think out of the gates and that too.

Q: But you were in the camp?

A: Yes. Uh-huh.

Q: And what specifically were you told to do at your post?

A: You know, I'm not sure. I think probably just to make sure that there was no going in or out and no -- probably no fights or anything like that. There was so much turmoil then and there was so many ethnic groups, prisoners and all. I'm not terribly sure.

Q: Do you remember anything that you had to do as far as your guard duty? Any fights you had to break up?

A: No, I don't. No. There were some cases where I think some of the prisoners perhaps tried to call attention to some of the -- maybe some of the Nazi guards who had put on a prisoner uniform to try to get out. But I don't remember a specific case where this

was -- where they pulled my attention to that or -- it was just so much confusion at that point. And these men -- these prisoners were so joyed to be liberated and eager to tell their stories. I guess it was probably all we could do to keep them off of us, if you know what I mean. Just picture a crowd pushing. Like this one photograph here. Here is a group of them that were -- this is a small group of the prisoners expressing their feelings at being liberated.

Q: In looking at the picture, what feelings do you see that they're expressing? How would you describe the picture?

A: Well, most of them seem to be smiling. I see one man there making a face of some sort. Here is an old man sitting down in front here that's head down, probably maybe not even -- he might not even have been normal emotionally at that time. Because I'm sure a large percentage of them who had been in there very long, it would have been hard for them to keep their mental stability. It was hard for us to keep it. It happened -- and you may be aware of this -- that when our sister company went in there first, they were so upset about what they saw that they actually lined up about 40 or 50 of these Nazi guards and just mowed them down with machine guns. And another eager officer from another unit that was there almost got court-martialed for killing these guards. But it was the sort of thing you would really expect because our soldiers were so torn up emotionally at seeing this type of thing.

Q: We have to stop and turn over the tape.

A: Sure.

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with

Thomas Gardiner, Tape Number 1, Side B. Mr. Gardiner, you were talking about your sister company and how difficult it was for them and for your company to deal with all of the emotions that were involved. You mentioned when they first entered they had lined up some of the German guards and machine-gunned them. Did anything like that happen with your company?

A: No. Because within the few hours that it took us to get in there, I think all of those guards that they'd found had been eliminated, probably, either killed or taken prisoner.

Q: So the circumstances were a little different?

A: Yeah, right. Uh-huh.

Q: But you said that you were billeted in the quarters of the German officers. What were they like, the quarters?

A: They were some pretty deluxe apartments. Yes, they were.

Q: Could you describe more specifically?

A: Well, they were well-furnished and seemed to have -- be well-decorated and -- and I suspect there were probably maybe nicer than what the equivalent officers in our military would be furnished. There was nothing second rate about them.

Q: So after about four days, your company moved on?

A: Yes. And then we moved on into Munich. And we saw very little action between there and Munich because Germany was falling apart at that point. I think some of the other units, maybe in other parts of Munich, may have had some combat getting in, but our entrance into Munich was pretty peaceful. And so we moved into Munich. We were -- We took over a section of middle-class family apartments and were billeted in

Munich for I think about a month and guarding important installations, utilities and things of that nature, I guess water supplies and everything there in Munich, until a military government unit could move in and take over there.

Q: And then what happened?

A: Well, then we were packed up and shipped from Munich out to a town called Augsburg, A-U-G-S-B-U-R-G, I think. It was not too far from Munich, I don't believe. But we were put out there and billeted in some farmhouses. This was kind of a farm village. And we were there I think about a month, just marking time, waiting for reassignment orders, and were taking some exercise and routine training while we were there. And not anything really exciting. I myself and one of my buddies who happened to have woodworking as a hobby before the military were given an opportunity to work in one of the local cabinet shops on military materials -- exercise equipment, I guess. I don't remember what all we did make, but we had the free use of these cabinet shops and it was kind of a pleasant break from military life.

Q: And then what happened?

A: Well, then we were packed up and put on trains on the so-called 40 and eights, 40 horses or -- 40 men or eight horses. The boxcars. And we were shipped to a tent camp near Le Havre, France. I think we traveled several days there. And we were in this tent camp then, awaiting reshipment back to the States. And our division was scheduled to come back to the States for a short leave and a couple of months amphibious training. And then we were scheduled to be shipped over and participate in the invasion of Japan. While we were in a tent camp, the A bombs were dropped, much to our happiness



because that eliminated the need for us to be invading Japan. So that's -- That was it. We were shipped back to the U.S. then on some of the victory freighters or victory-sized ships. They hold about 2,000 troops, I think. And we got back to the States. We were given 45 days leave. And then those that didn't have enough points for discharge had to report to some other camps down in Texas. And I was one of those. I wound up down in -- well, two different camps down in Texas. And from that point I wound up being able to negotiate a discharge. My company was still doing some critical work, and they interceded for my release and returned to my job. And my wife had become pregnant during my 45 days leave, so I headed home.

Q: Was that your first child?

A: Yes. Yes, ma'am. And we had been married six years when he was born. And he was very much wanted. That's the heavyset fellow that was with us out here in the hall.

Q: So how was your readjustment to civilian life after all of that?

A: Well, in a way I think it was much easier than a lot of the fellows had because I had a job to go to. I had a loving family. I wasn't hanging loose like so many soldiers were. It took some months, I think, to overcome the emotional part of it because I've always been sort of an emotional person anyhow. And I used to have nightmares. I'd stay up sometimes until 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock in the morning, working in my hobby shop just until I could get sleepy enough to go to sleep. I don't know. I guess gradually the trauma went away. I still 50 years later sometimes get a little bit emotional when I get to talking about it or if we see a war movie or something. But I guess that's quite normal too.

Q: And what about your experience at Dachau? Is that something that you have thought

about?

A: I have, yes. I was never a racist. Never in my life. I was brought up to not be. But through my experiences in the Army and then in Europe and then especially at seeing Dachau and seeing what racism could do to people, I came out with an obsession of not letting myself or any of my family ever become racist towards any ethnic group or color of people or whatever. And to this day, that's held pretty true. Because that's what caused most of that turmoil in Europe. The Nazis had to pick out somebody to blame the world's troubles on, and it happened to be the Jews and the non -- other non-Germans. And I don't see that. I believe very much in judging people as individuals. And I think it -- it helped me. Those memories has helped me be a stronger Christian. I was led to be a Christian on the battlefield. I had a battlefield conversion. I've tried to live it all my life. And I think being an active Christian, one must work actively against any kind of discrimination activity or anything. I've never been an activist in terms of joining any group because that's a form of hate itself. There's things like these Klu Klux Klan and some of these militia groups in the U.S. now and all that. Well, they're hate groups that if they were allowed to be out of control, they would be just as heartless as the German Nazis. Some of the things they've done have been very similar.

Q: Just before this interview, I understand that you saw the exhibit in the Holocaust Museum.

A: Right.

Q: And why did you want to come to see the museum?

A: Well, I guess partly to refresh my own memory. But I think more than anything

because my oldest son had been here once before and had been kind of shocked by it. And I had talked to him about the things that I saw. And I had let my children see these photographs that we took and had emphasized to them that they must appreciate that it was real, the holocaust. It wasn't propaganda and so on. And my son really wanted me to come out with him. And I guess that's the primary reason. I guess if he hadn't come out here initially I probably never would have. But he brought a book back from here and I read it. And then we both bought the book, the Schindler's List book, saw the movie, and then there was the sequel to the Schindler's List, the Schindler Legacy or something. And I guess it just refreshed memories. And then my son developed a friendship or a business relationship or something with this Jewish man down in Houston who was from a survivor family or something, and they got to talking about collaborating on writing a book or something. I guess my involvement then has been more a matter of trying to support my son in a worthy endeavor than any personal desire on my part. It didn't open my eyes to anything new here, I think. It maybe just emphasized the immensity of the things that went on.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

A: Not really. Not really.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very much for telling us your story. It's very important, and we appreciate your giving your testimony.

A: I hope that it's somehow, some way maybe helps to prevent a reoccurrence at any time, you know.

Q: Thank you. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview

## **Interview with Thomas Gardiner**

**20**

with Tom Gardiner.

### **Conclusion of Interview**