

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Dr. Samuel Hagner. This is tape number three, side A. What kind of practice do you have, psychiatric practice?

What kind of practice do I have? I've been retired since 1994. Prior to that--

Did you have?

I was in practice for 36 years in the practice of general psychiatry, general adult psychiatry. I've practiced for 11 years in Philadelphia. And then I moved to New Hampshire to a semi-rural area and practiced for another 25 years.

In dealing with people who have gone through terrible trauma, which you, yourself, had gone through during the war, do you feel you brought an additional insight into dealing with these people?

Excuse me. Yes, I think I was able to empathize, if you will, with people who had suffered traumatic experiences. And even with people who had not. If one has ever experienced a severe depression, that could be traumatic in itself.

In fact, I, myself, experienced a major depression in the early 1970s. This was long after my own analysis. This was long after I had left Philadelphia. And so I know what it's like to not only have experienced something like Dachau, but I also know what it's like to have experienced a major depression. And both these have allowed me to-- and did allow me to empathize with and to have insight into what other people were experiencing.

Do you attribute any part of that experience in the 1970s to what you went through in Dachau?

No, I really don't think so. I think that had more to do with what I now recognize as a biological predisposition in the Hagner family. I remind you of the finding my father in that state in August of 1945. My daughter's had three postpartum depressions and three pregnancies. She's battling a thousand. And these are serious depressions.

And now as I think back, and this occurred to me somewhere in my psychiatric training, my father's mother was probably prone to depressions, which they weren't called that back in the '30s. So I really can't attribute by Dachau experience to that depression.

I think-- because I think because the Dachau experience has never really left me, and yet I haven't been depressed in a major way since 1970s. And I wasn't prior to that.

I think I've assimilated, if that's the word, the Dachau experience. I've had to live with it. I'm not saying that I've made my peace with it. It's just become a part of me. That's not the same thing as making a peace with it. You live with it. It's like-- I can't think of a good analogy.

Maybe if you have a permanent physical disability, you learn to live with it even though you don't like it and maybe you never make a peace with it. Well, that's the Dachau experience for me.

How often do you think about it?

I can't say with certainty. Certainly, in recent months, as I knew this interview was coming up, I've thought about it more frequently, but that's an artifact really. Aside from that, I don't know how often. It's strange how it will come up in different ways through free association, if you will.

Something will trigger it, bring it to mind. I could be watching something on television or reading something. I don't know. I don't think there's any pattern, any rhyme or reason to it. I wish I could answer that in a more definitive way.

Do you read a lot about what happened during war in the camps?

No, I don't. No, I don't. I went through a time when I did some of that, but I think I have always felt that I was there.

That's enough. I don't want-- it's not really pleasant, you know. Like this hasn't been pleasant this afternoon. I don't-- I'm not a masochist. I don't like to dredge this stuff up anymore than I have to.

When your children were 18 and 19, did that bring up for you what you had experienced at their age?

Like an anniversary reaction? No, I don't think so. No, these things that bring the experience to mind are not so-- they're just oddball things, happenstance, random. Random events can bring it to mind.

Now putting on your psychiatrist hat, how do-- or also because of your experience, how do you analyze that terrible evil in humanity that can be done? The extreme evil that you witnessed?

I wish I had an easy answer for that. How can I explain that degree of man's inhumanity to man? The simplistic explanation would be that man is capable because of what I guess Freud referred to as the dark side of himself, the aggressive impulse or whatever. But that's never been very satisfactory to me as an explanation.

I really can't explain it. I wish I could. I think it can only be done in theory. And that's never been very satisfying for me. Any more than I could explain some other acts of violence. People killing their parents, people killing their children, or their wives, or their husbands, I can't explain any of that. You can try.

But I've never been that happy with psychiatric theory when it comes to trying to explain those things. I don't think there's any explanation. Walk away from the concept of the death instinct that I was taught in psychoanalysis. It's just not very satisfying.

Do you feel that within each of us there is that capacity to do the kind of evil that you witnessed?

I certainly wonder when I experienced that rage that I did, that cold rage, as I said to you, in Dachau. It made me wonder. But then I thought, but I haven't committed murder since. I live with that cold rage. Interesting question.

If I had had the opportunity, would I have while in Dachau, or while in that mood? I'd like to think that like I couldn't have, even though I was feeling like it. It's one thing to want to do something. It's something else not to.

I'd like to think that we have enough control over ourselves that even though we may have a murderous impulse, we don't have to act on it. I'd like to think that. Good Lord, what else is man all about if he isn't a little more civilized than the wild beasts in the forest?

Can you elaborate a little bit more? You said, it's been a conflict in your life since you experienced the whole-- the war, the idea of pacifism, and do you feel there's something-- such a thing as a just war, there is a time when certain measures have to be taken? Over the years, have you talked about it with yourself?

I certainly have. And I guess that dialogue will never-- or monologue will never stop, that discourse. I don't know whether there is such a thing as just war or not. People have often said to me, well, you were lucky, you were in a just war. Pity the poor guys that fought in Vietnam or Korea. And I can understand that. I can understand that.

I would like to think, though-- well, I'd like to think that there is no such thing as just war, but I really can't-- I can't defend that very far. I remember saying to the folks at Oberlin during our war reunion, I said, when I was discharged from the army after World War II, I was convinced there was going to be a World War III, just as there had been a World War II after World War I.

But a funny thing happened, those atom bombs were dropped. And the nuclear deterrent now I think has changed the whole map of the world. It's changed the way we think. Or maybe it hasn't, but it's changed the way we feel. Now we're afraid, maybe. And maybe we should be afraid. And maybe in that sense, the nuclear deterrents are serving a very good purpose.

But that doesn't answer your question. And I realize it doesn't. Is there such a thing as just war? Gail, I don't know. I

know that's not a very good answer, but I do not know. I didn't find the answer in psychoanalysis. I haven't found it since.

All I know is what I felt then and what I feel now. And I still abhor war. I think it's miserable, awful. And every day, I pick up the paper and I see the little wars going on all over the world. It disgusts me. Rwanda, Ireland, people blowing each other up. For what purpose?

But I do recognize that if I went over the edge that one time in Dachau, well, it's possible. But at the same time, I didn't act on it. But that doesn't answer your question, does it? Would I still go to war if I thought it was a just one?

I don't know. I have to be honest with you. I do not know. And I am 72 years old. And I will probably not know. And I will probably go to my grave not even knowing.

How would you stop a second Hitler now?

How would I stop a second Hitler now? I'd like to say that I would be smart enough not allow him to get a foothold in the first place. I think, for example, we learned some things after Hitler. Thinking about how he got his start.

We've handled things differently since World War II. The Marshall Plan, for example-- we didn't just exact revenge and sit them on the enemy, say, all right, now, tough-- tough luck, make your own way. We helped them back. Look at Germany, what he did for Germany. It was tough, to take the enemy, but give them a helping hand. But look where they are now.

I'd like to think that we could avoid another Hitler, at least on that scale. I'm not sure that we can keep some of the African nations from genocide. But at least on that large scale, with so-called developed countries, quote-unquote-- I like to think we're developed in all ways-- I'd like to think that we could. And I think maybe we could-- we can avoid another Hitler.

Have you been back to Germany?

I did go back the one time. My wife and I went back to visit some friends in Munich. And we took a two-week automobile trip, through Austria mainly.

Drove by the entrance to the camp. My wife said-- no, I said, "Do you want to go in?" She said, "Only if you do." I said, "No. But I'll take you in." She said, "No, if you do want to go, you're enough experience for me, that's enough for me." Meaning that we had talked about it.

Why didn't you want to go back in?

[INAUDIBLE], no. No. But it was just brought it all back. It's one thing to sit here and talk about it, but, uh-uh, I didn't want to go back there. Because I could just imagine if I was standing there, I'd start trying to picture where everything was. And I'd look. No. No way. I've been there once. That's enough. Or as somebody would say, been there, done that.

Have been other times in your life when you have resisted remembering that experience?

Resisted?

Remembering that experience.

I don't know. I have to think about that one. I think in part-- you asked earlier, when I returned on campus, I resisted remembering, because I was resisting talking about it. I didn't want to sound like, oh, there goes a vet telling old war stories again, whether it be flying an airplane and being a real hot shot or doing what I did.

And since then, there've been times I really haven't wanted to think about it, because I didn't want to talk about it and I

didn't want to feel it. Then there are times when I don't mind feeling it as long as it doesn't last too long.

I think that partly depends on the circumstance, the situation in which I am at the moment, the person I'm with. Now, for example, as I was planning to come down here today, there were people in the neighborhood that perhaps knew that I was coming down here for this purpose. Or didn't know-- they just said, "Oh, we hear you're going away for a week." "Yep."

And I might let it drop at that. And with others, I might say, "Yeah, and this is why." So I think part of it depends on with whom I'm speaking at the moment, whether I'm likely to bring it up or not, or want to remember it and talk about it, or just remember it.

And I guess that has to do with trust, doesn't it? Do you trust the person with whom you're talking. Not just that they would tolerate my saying, "I one time was very, very angry." But also, I don't want to be seen as an old man, talking old stories and repeating himself.

Would you be a different person today if you had not experienced Dachau?

Oh, I think so. Oh, I think so, yes. I think probably I would never have gotten in touch, thoroughly, that thoroughly, with that dark side that's in me. That may or may not be within all of us, but certainly I found out was in me. Yes, I'd be a different person. I might have-- I might have not dealt with certain issues in my analysis. I don't know, it's hard to say.

It's a humbling experience to come into-- to come into touch with a part of yourself that you didn't know existed. It's a pretty humbling experience.

Are you angry or bitter that you did witness Dachau and other people didn't? That you were forced to witness this?

It depends on the day of week when you ask me that. There are times, yes, when I am angry, that why should I have been exposed to that. That wasn't fair. You don't do that to 19-year-olds, or 18-year-olds, or even 25-year-olds, I don't know.

But then at other times, no, I'm not bitter about it. Because it did teach me something about myself. It taught me something about people, too. Not all of it very pleasant, obviously, but it did teach me. Yes, I grew up there, I suppose, you might say. But as I say, that depends on the day of the week in which you ask me.

How do you, as a psychiatrist, explain the response of people in so many different ways. Here we are capable of doing so much evil, as you witnessed, and yet there were people during the war who put their lives on the line to save others out of altruism. How do you explain the difference? Is it in their upbringing? Why does one person put his life on the line to save someone and another one do other terrible things?

Why could one person be selfless and another be so overwhelmingly selfish and arrogant? I suppose-- well, I was going to say, I suppose it is conditioning, upbringing, if you will, environment, or nurture, as oppose to nature. But I don't know whether that's the complete answer.

If you had asked me that question early in my training, I probably would have said, oh, yeah, that's all upbringing. That's all environmental conditioning. I'm not so sure about that anymore. I'm not so sure that we're all born equal when it comes to feelings.

Oh, I think we're all born with the capacity to be angry. But I'm not so sure that we're all born with the same capacity to control that anger, or to accept that anger, or to deal with it, or whatever the word is.

For years, I used to wonder in my training, and even later in practice, about that term, resolution. They used to say in training, "Well, the patient's cured when they've resolved their conflicts." And I used to wonder, what does that mean?

What is resolution? How do you resolve something? Does it go away? Does it change its shape? Its form? Does it

become less intense? I don't know. I don't think anybody really has a good answer.

There are a lot of articles been written in psychiatry-- a lot of articles have been written in psychiatry about the beginning and the middle of therapy, but not a heck of a lot about the end of therapy, meaning that wonderful, things have been resolved.

I think the best working definition I finally came up with was-- this is after years of experience-- a person has finished treatment when they can tolerate-- when they can let themselves experience the whole gamut of emotions available to man.

Let those feelings wash over them. Not hide them, not blunt them, not wish them away. Let them be there. And then decide in a rational way what to do about them. I think that's the best definition I can come up with.

So to get back to your question, I think anybody is capable of this-- whatever leads to genocide. People are capable of those kinds of feelings. But what they do with those feelings is something else again. And I think that's what we're talking about when we speak of maturity or having resolved issues.

In other words, I think Hitler was crazy. Certainly, he was immature, but I think he was also crazy. And he could never see his anger in terms of anything else. His aggression, in terms of anything else, but himself. He could never see it in terms of society or other people. It was just what he, Hitler, believed and wanted. And I think some of it was truly delusional.

But he was able to carry a good part of the country with him.

He certainly was, indeed. And I think that, therein, we get into issues like mob psychology, how a charismatic or a strong leader can sway people, ala the way lynching mobs used to operate. Then there were also social factors.

Some of the Germans, I'm sure, weren't crazy, who finally swung over to Hitler and the cause. Maybe they truly believed that he would bring about a new social order. I'd like to think that at some point they realized they been sold a bill of goods, but I don't know when and where. I'm sure some of them did. Of course. I don't think everybody, but by that time, things had gotten out of hand.

Were you completely comfortable when you went back to Germany to visit?

No, no. Part of me thought, isn't this ironic? Here's the enemy from World War II doing very well indeed, probably the leading industrial nation in Europe. And I thought, isn't this ironic? And yet, that's a far sight better than what happened to Germany after World War I, far sight better.

And I'll tell you something else too. As we were going from France to Germany in the trucks, going into the war, we saw how the French lived. We thought they were dirty and unsanitary. And we got into Germany, and these people were clean. They believed in sanitation. They didn't live in filth.

Why, they lived like people do at home. Isn't that funny? And we saw that right away. These people have the same day-to-day values as we do, in terms of health, sanitation, and so forth. Whereas the French, we just thought, my Lord, how can anybody live this way? Now that was back then, of course. And that was rural French. I mean, we're not speaking Parisians or whatnot. In other words, maybe we have more in common with Germans than we like to admit.

When you meet a German today, are you comfortable with him or her?

I think it more depends on who that person is, how he comes across as an individual. I try not to-- what's the word I want-- oh, dear, it slips me-- put people in categories. I try to take them at face value. Take them at face value, give them a chance to tell me who they are. And the same goes for other races, of course. I try to do that.

When you are in Dachau, did you realize that the greatest percentage of the victims were Jews?

Oh, yes.

How did you know that?

I don't know how, but I was very much aware that a few were political prisoners, but most of them were Jews, yes. I think I even mentioned, 98% or something like that, was some figure I'd gotten. I don't know where I got that. Is that in the letter? I think it is. I have no idea where I got that. Sorry.

Are you still in contact with Doris?

Doris, no. I was in touch with her up until she married. In fact, I went to visit her after she had her first child. I can remember vividly, she was having a terrible time. The child was allergic to milk so she was using soy. Oh, stained everything under the sun. And she was coping with all this.

And that I married. And I remember visiting her and her husband one evening with my wife. It didn't go well. With her, it was fine. But we didn't mesh with her husband. It just didn't click. And something told me, uh-huh, we'd better not push this one. And she made no attempt to keep in touch either. I think we both knew that evening that that episode was over. He was-- we just didn't click. I don't know why. He was not Jewish. He is not-- or was-- I don't know whether she's still married to him or not. He was not Jewish, but he was a little too macho for me.

Did she lose any of her family, extended family?

Not that I know of. I'm not sure of that. I don't recall her ever speaking of that. I don't recall.

Are you still a Quaker?

No, I'm not a practicing Quaker. Somewhere, when I went back and tried to rejoin those, as I said, those kind, gentle people, it just didn't work. Somehow, I felt that they were not seeing everything for what it is, either in themselves, or in the world, or in me, or whatever. And I didn't know how I could ever tell them about me. And I just drifted away.

I married a woman who's an avowed atheist. You might say, well, maybe that was no accident. Well, maybe not. She's a very-- in her own way, a very religious person, but she's an atheist. And one of my sons is. And she had something to do with that, I think.

So she's never attended church, but she's never stopped me from doing so. But suddenly-- not suddenly, but gradually, it just became meaningless for me. It just didn't hold any more water. And I can't say that I've missed it. I think I found worship, ways to worship in other ways.

Have your political views been affected by your experience?

No, my political views were in part framed by my mother. She voted for Norman Thomas for 20 straight years. She was a woman ahead of her time. And she used to laugh and say that, "Well, George," my father, "I'll cancel your vote every time I--".

But no, no, it's been pretty-- I guess you have to call me a liberal Democrat. It's been that way all along. Hasn't changed a bit. And my wife is too. And our kids are pretty much. Well, maybe my daughter-- she's a yuppie. But my sons are pretty non-traditional, shall we say.

Did you say that as you've gotten older, you think about this more? You think more about your experience as you've gotten older?

Did I say that?

Do you feel that way or not?

No, not necessarily. No, as I say, what would cause me to think about the war or my experience in the war is a random kind of a thing. It depends-- it could be something just completely out of the blue. Or it could be something I'm reading, or something-- a remark that somebody makes. Or it might be the mood I'm in.

Is there a sound today or a smell today that triggers?

Today, you mean--

In today's world that triggers something about Dachau to you?

I guess what is likely to is when I read about atrocities in some of the African nations, for example. When I read about the genocide in some of those countries. That can do it, sure. They can do it. I'm trying to think of something else.

Any smell or sound that-- any sound or smell? Besides the pictures, anything visual?

No, I have think it's mostly visual. No particular sound or odor would call that to mind.

I don't think we talked in detail about your work with the displaced persons. What did you actually do with them?

I don't think we did a lot, as I think about it now, and had you asked that question earlier. I don't think we did a lot with displaced persons. I think after we left Dachau and entered that one hospital, the nuns' hospital-- the Catholic hospital run by the nuns, I think we were-- we just didn't do a lot. And I'm not sure why. It wasn't too long before we were sent to southern France for the-- for the future redeployment.

I recall at one point being in a rest camp after Dachau. Now whether we went there directly, we might have. Maybe people felt that we needed a break or something, I don't know. Because I recall being in a place somewhere in Germany, near a river, and having time to go down, and sit by the river, and talk to German civilians, young boys, kids, for example.

I remember one of those offering us a ride on his motorcycle. That was probably one of the few times we had contact with the civilians. This is after the war, of course. The war is now over.

But I really-- and why we deserved that kind of a rest, I have no idea. Now you're raising a question. Could people have felt that we were all pretty frazzled when we came out of Dachau? I don't know. But there's a letter somewhere. I don't know whether I talk about being in a rest camp.

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection Interview with Samuel Hagner. This is tape number three, side B. And you were talking about being in a rest camp after you got out of Dachau.

I'm not quite sure. I believe we were only in the rest camp for maybe a week or so. Just where that fits in with how long we were out of Dachau and when we were at the Catholic hospital, and then shipped over to France, I don't know where it all fits in. But I don't think we really did much in an organized fashion after we left Dachau.

I don't know whether it's because we were such a small unit and that we really didn't fit in well with the post-war scene, which required an organized medical effort to deal with the displaced persons. I have a hunch that that's part of it. That the field hospital is really a type of unit designed for war. And it doesn't really fit into a non war situation or a post-war situation.

It's a MASH type hospital, really, if you can imagine that television series. And it really does not adapt well to a post-war situation. We just didn't have the facilities, the type of equipment to deal with chronic illness. I guess this is-- now I'm coming to it, yeah.

We were equipped more to deal with acute traumatic injury. We were not equipped to deal with chronic illnesses, the dietary problems that you would have to-- that you would see in the displaced persons, for example. Sure, we could treat the infectious diseases, but probably not so well as a general hospital.

Because our pharmacy was not that sophisticated. We were a pretty simple outfit. We were not as simple as a first aid station, but we were not much more sophisticated than that. Strictly, we were geared and designed to take care of the battle wounded. And that was about it. We couldn't take care of battle fatigue, for example.

When you were talking to that German villagers, did you ever talk about what you had seen at Dachau.

The couple of occasions where we had-- you mean with the boys, the young boys? I don't think we discussed it with them. But in the immediate area of Dachau, we did have a chance to talk to a couple civilians. And I recall I did personally.

And this was when I was really wrestling with, well, how could you let this happen if you knew the camp was in existence? And I was trying to find the answer to that. But I didn't do that with these young kids that we met later, no.

What were the older people's answers to you?

The responses were that-- at first, they didn't want to admit that they knew that the camps existed. But when they finally said, yes, because we pressed them, they said they were frightened. They were terrified that if they stepped out of line that they would be killed. That's about the only answer we could get from them.

Did that satisfy you?

Yes and no. I think probably, yeah, at least with the Bavarian farmer. He's not a very sophisticated individual. And he didn't have much wherewithal for dealing with those kinds of problems. I was never exposed to the educated or cultured German, the aristocracy, or the well-to-do. So I have no idea. These were simple folk that I came into contact with.

Well, is there anything that we haven't covered, any thoughts that you have, any feelings you wanted to express?

I can't think of anything. We've covered more ground than I thought we would ever-- you have a way about you.

Why did you do this interview?

I thought, well, maybe there is something that I could add to what you already know. Oh, I know, I wanted some answers for myself too. One of them was, could you tell me whether there were hot air ducts? That's one you could help me with.

I was curious. I was afraid, but I was curious, just what would you be asking me. And maybe I'd be answering some things that I wouldn't have not known I would answer in the way that I was going to answer them.

I certainly did not expect that I would have had the catharsis that I had. I knew I might get emotional, but I had no idea I would get that emotional. I have no-- I'm not sorry about it. It doesn't bother me. I was just a little bit surprised.

You sometimes think that you have everything tucked away neatly. And then I know I don't. But sometimes the force with which it reasserts itself surprises me. Have I answered your question?

Well, we're very grateful that you did do the interview. Thank you very much.

Thank you for asking me.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection Interview with Dr. Samuel Hagner.

<https://collections.ushmm.org>
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection