

Interviewer: We are at the home of Mr. Nathanson, Frank Nathanson. And I am Rena Rothlein and Mr. Nathanson is a liberator. And we are going to interview him this afternoon.

F.N.: No, I am not a liberator.

Q: "What do you consider yourself to be?"

A: Well, when you say liberator, do you mean a liberator of camps?

Q: Yes.

A: We did not liberate a camp, not a concentration camp. But I went to one.

Q: Let's start from the beginning.

A: I was from the 76th Infantry Division, 304th Infantry Battalion, F-Company. And the reason that I called Muriel was that I think there was something in the article that asked information if anybody knew anything about people who had helped Jews during the war.

-Stop in Tape-

Alright, as we approached the Rhine River, we stopped in a town and when we would do that, we would put German people out of their homes, it was "Mein en soldaten schlafen en diesen hausen, alles wohen en diesen hausen..."

Q: Translate that please.

A: All the people in this house...My soldiers are going to sleep in this house. All the people in this house must get out.

Q: What date was this?

A: Oh God. I may be able to pick it up in my battalion book.

Q: Approximately.

A: I don't know. When did we cross the Rhine River? I would say March...

Of 1940?...

1945, the year the war ended. At any rate, we put these people out and we took over the house. And that was just my own little squad.

Q: What was your position?

- A: I was just a PFC. And I was the battalion runner at that time, assistant gunner on a light 30 machine gun. There was...to make sure that these people stayed out of trouble and off the streets. They could only come out once in the morning for an hour and come back to their homes to get pots, pans, clothes whatever they wanted and once again in the evening just before sundown. Other than that, if they were seen on the street, they'd be shot. So two men came back up to this house. Now from the interior of the house it was evident that this was the home of a Catholic family, with all icons around, the... Mary, Crucifixes...
- Q: What town was it?
- A: I'll have to really try and find that out.
- Q: It was in the Rhine area?
- A: It was very close to the Rhine River. And the whole town was apparently Catholic, we didn't know it. But small town. In any rate, in the morning two men came back up to this town. There was a picture of a young man in a German Navy uniform. They came in and they asked me my name. And I could understand a bit of German then, if they would talk slowly. I gave them my name and they looked at me funny. They stated to get a bit excited and they looked at me again and I said, "Ich bein Jude," "I am a Jew." They got very excited and they wanted me to come with them. And we walked down dome streets and went to this house, they went in and they jabbered very excitedly to the women in the house. And they dragged me up to the attic, moved furniture, rolled back some rug on the floor, pulled up floor boards, almost like in the movies, and reached down and pulled out Torah, prayer shawls, all the stuff of their religion. And they were talking so fast, I couldn't follow anything. But it was obvious what had happened. So I took them up to my commanding officer, a man named Sidney Rider, a captain and he spoke German like a native. And he said, the man says they've been hidden through the war by the Catholic people in this town. The picture that I saw...
- Q: These two people?
- A: They were two couples. The whole town was in on it though, they had to be because they had escaped the war. The boy was there. He was serving in the German Submarine Corp and that's a ruse that they had to carry out unless they gave themselves away. So there...
- Q: But they were a Jewish couple?
- A: They were a Jewish family. Two Jewish families being hidden by the town, this Catholic town.

- Q: Now wait, the people who came to you were...
- A: Were Jewish.
- Q: It was two Jewish couples, four people?
- A: Right.
- Q: I see. (I thought they had just hidden the Jewish symbols.)
- A: No. No, they actually hid the couples. They had not turned them in. They had not...they had gone out of their way to protect these people. And they had given them all the effects in this house to make it look like another Catholic home.
- Q: (Remarkable)
- A: So, throughout the war...and their son had been, I don't know if he was drafted or signed up or what...but obviously all young men that were capable in their country were in service. So their son...
- Q: That was one couple's son. There was one offspring out of both couples?
- A: As far as I know. We didn't stay long enough to get a lot of information, by the next day we were gone.
- Q: Had they been natives of this town? Or how did they get there?
- A: I don't know that. But I think they were natives of the town. If I could contact Sidney Rider, he may have remembered more because he talked to them.
- Q: Was Sidney rider also Jewish?
- A: Yes. He had been a first lieutenant in the town of Shpicer, we lost all of our officers. In the midst of a fire fight, he was sent over from B-Company to take over my company, F-Company.
- Q: What else were these people able to tell Sidney Rider that he was able to later tell you?
- A: Well, I don't know the detail. All that I can tell you was that just by sheer accident I had picked that house for us to stay in. And I threw these people out and when they came back in the morning, they looked at me and they asked my name. And when I gave it to them, they must have been pretty sure I was Jewish. And so...they didn't ask, but I told them that I was Jewish. That used to scare most of them half to death, they didn't know what to make of that.

Q: Why would it scare them?

A: If you were a German in World War II and you know what had gone on in Germany, wouldn't you be frightened.

Q: They were Germans

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Oh, Chemnitz is in Germany?

A: Chemnitz is in Germany.

Q: I see. And the children...

A: It's now East Germany. But this was all over Germany.

Q: And the children that they took in could have been from all over the rest of Europe.

A: Any place that they picked them up. In their invasion through Poland, Russia...remember the Russians...I mean the Germans got to the outskirts of Stalingrad, to the outskirts of Moscow, Leningrad...

Q: Were these children forced upon these families?

A: Oh no. No. no. Their sons and able bodied men were in the service. This was replacement labor only it came free and you could treat it like an animal.

Q: Was this mostly farm labor?

A: They worked in factories, they worked in farms, they worked anywhere.

Q: What became of those children?

A: Well, that's my next story. As I say about two weeks after the end of the war, somebody from battalion headquarters came and told our company commander they wanted four guys from each infantry company to go down to the Chemnitz and go to the railroad station. Total message. Go down to the railroad station. So we hopped on a jeep, they took us down the Chemnitz. That was a pretty big city...and we had a big fight for it. When we got there, there was a hell of a long freight train. As a matter of fact there were two of them. And there were...it seemed like thousands of people, milling around...civilians. These were Poles, Russians, Slovenians...all the displaced people. Slave labor again. And they were going to be repatriated to their own countries. This was a move by Allied Military Government, but Allied Military Government was so disorganized, I

don't think they knew much about what they were doing. So we said, "What are we supposed to do?" And they said, "We want one man for every two box cars." And they're going to put the...they threw some straw in the box cars. They issued them some rations from a German army warehouse that they had taken...black bread, some cheese, Ersatz coffee. And we said, "Are we going to be gone overnight?" And they said, "Yea." Nobody had told us. So I hopped up to our battalion headquarters and got a case of K-rations and brought it back down to the train. The train...I'll show you on a map where we went...from Chemnitz we were headed...we didn't know where we were headed...but we ended up that night in Weimar. The end of the...what...the 2nd Right. And stopped in the freight yards there...the marshalling yards.

Q: Let me interrupt for a minute...How many freight trains?...there were just two of you? And you were...

A: Two of us...there was...two from my company, two from rifle company...

Q: Okay, right...there were others...you each had one box car?

A: There was one American soldier for every other box car...

Q: Every other box car...

A: Each one of us had two we were supposed to be in charge of. What we were supposed to do, nobody had the slightest idea. We only had one or two lieutenants with us and they didn't have the slightest idea. But they said, "These people are being repatriated to their countries and you're going to go with them to their overnight stop off."

Q: Were they already in the cars when you arrived?

A: No, they were just milling around.

Q: And so they went into the cars haphazardly? They weren't...

A: Pretty well...so many to a car. They just opened up the...the doors were opened, food was shoved in. And they told them so many to a car. I would guess there were about 20 or 30 to a car.

Q: So there was room to sit down and lie down?

A: You could sit down. You could lie in the straw. But the train, when it progressed down the tracks...everything had been shot up and bombed out, so we would go, God knows how many miles and then the train would stop because the bridge would be out. Then it would backup and try another route. So it was three steps forward, two steps back, three steps forward. These people were told that if

they had to relieve themselves don't get more than a few yards from the train because they would never give them any signal or anything. As soon as the guy was ready to move, he would move. So, women, men, whatever...they'd just run out in these fields, relieve themselves and come running back...like a bunch of animals. We stopped over night and when we finally got there at apparently a large city with a big marshalling yard...a railroad marshalling yard. We slept in the box car overnight. They watched us eat K-Rations, we shared our K-Rations with them, which was amazing to them. In the morning, my buddy and I decided...stupid as it may sound...we went up and hauled the German out who was the engineer on the train and told him that if he left while we were gone, we'd catch him and we'd shoot him. We were still in our combat gear, dirty uniforms, we each had a 45 stuck in our belts and we went into town. Weimar had been turned into Allied Military Headquarters. So we saw the hotels they'd say, First 3-grade, non-coms, officers quarters, field grade officers only, correspondence, press, and we were like "Willy and Joe" so we snuck in the back of this place and they were cooking breakfast for them...eggs, fresh biscuits, sweet rolls...We emptied our canteens, stole some coffee, stole a big tray of these rolls and told the cooks, "You say anything and we'll shoot you." Went back to the marshalling yards. When the train started, we were no more than half hour away from Weimar. And we pulled up in a big long siding, along a big, long shed, a wooden shed. And we were told that's where all these people would be...that was where they're going to keep them to process them to wherever they were going. And as we started to get off the train, a young Polish 2nd lieutenant jumped up on the roof of one of the box cars...you know, with the cape and the little square hat with the tassel...and he was yelling, in German telling them, "Get back in, get back in."

Q: Why was he yelling?

A: Trying to get them out, this argument was going on and finally one of the lieutenants pointed a 45 at him and said, "Get off the box car or we'll shoot you off." And then he came down and told us why, "Wait until you walk through the shed to the other side." So we walked through...on the other...we were at Buchenwald. On the other side of the shed were the pictures that you see there. Long lines of bodies...a hundred yards long, stacked as high as your head, slicked down with lime. Special little stacks of babies bodies. Stacks of eye glasses. It was just a horror sight and by that time there were Allied Military Government people there. There were correspondents there. There were some civilians...that I couldn't tell you what they were...some Germans, some not. Of course, the Germans all denied that they even knew this thing had existed. You could have smelled it from Weimar. They cremated the bodies there. You see one of them, sitting in an oven, he's still in human form. But that was where...(In reference to some pictures the interviewer and interviewee are looking at: your top picture, that's and incinerated body but not quite gone, that's in an oven.

Q: What was your reaction to this?

- A: Horror. It was so terrible, you just couldn't believe and you...it was almost beyond belief. You couldn't...
- Q: And this was two weeks after the war ended and they were still...)
- A: Only they had them slicked down with lime by then... they were getting ready to cart them away...what was left. There were a few prisoners still there... in their prison garb, which was purple and white stripe. And one of them followed me around saying, pointing at himself, and saying, "cigar." And I said, "I don't have any cigars." And I offered him cigarettes. And he said, "No, no Cigar." And I said, "I smoke a pipe, see." I showed him my pipe. He said, shook his head, "Cigar." And at that time some correspondent came by me and he laughed and he said, "He's trying to tell you, he's a gypsy." Then it came to me, cygonier is the female, cigar is a male gypsy. So once the camp was liberated, he was willing to stay and beg or do whatever. I don't know what he wanted from me, but I thought he was trying to get a cigar. I was getting mad at him because he wouldn't take the cigarettes and I didn't offer him my pipe.
- Q: Before you got to Buchenwald, had you already heard about these type of situations?
- A: Yes...but, I'd never been to one. Now we...when you say liberators, yes we went through many small towns where there were mass burials, including some of our pilots that had been shot down. They'd just been thrown into mass graves. And others, where they had some time or the burgomeister of a town was smart enough to know we were on our way very shortly, they'd dig up these bodies, give them individual graves and put flowers down.
- Q: The pilots?
- A: Yes. But it was strictly a lie. And others...we made the burgomeister, the officials of the town, the men... old, most of the were...get down in those graves and dig up those bodies. And they wanted to put gloves and rubber aprons on and we said, "Uh, uh, no way. You get in and you touch them. You put them there." They were slime. That's the beast of Buchenwald...that's the German guard...that female...who would cut tattooed skin from human bodies to make lampshades.
- Q: I thought it was a woman who did that?
- A: That is a woman. (Referring to pictures Interviewee had).
- Q: What happened to her?
- A: I don't know. They kept pet lions there...they would cut up bodies and feed the lions the human meat.

Q: These people were still there when you took these pictures?

A: I haven't the slightest idea.

Q: This isn't your picture?

A: I bought these from some guy at the camp. I didn't have a camera or anything. Somebody had taken pictures and made some copies and that's the original paper he had them folded up in. He was peddling them and I bought some.

Q: And this is one of the prisoners.

A: This is one of the prisoners. This is what they looked like. They were alive but they looked dead. And some of them died when they fed them. Their systems couldn't take it.

Q: Poor heart. How long was the train trip?

A: For us, it was a full day, from morning to night before we got to Weimar.

Q: How many miles did you cover?

A: 50 or 100 miles...Maybe there's some scale on this thing (Referring to a map he is looking at.) When you're a low life...

Q: How old were you at this time?

A: 21, 22 something like that.

Here's where we were. That's the city of Chemnitz and there's Weimar. It's not a great distance. At Altenberg we had taken one of the last big German airports...all their fighters, bombers. There's Leipzig, there's Dresden. Chemnitz is south of it and half the distance between. We met the Russians at Mittweide. That's as far as we could go. We were driving for Dresden and from there they said no more advance. And from here on in you start firing green and white flares back and forth so you're not shooting at Russians and they at you.

Q: Is this where the line was essentially?

A: No, we met right there.

Q: I see.

A: I think it's called...I can't remember the name of the river. It goes right through it and that's where we met them.

- Q: And they brought the people being repatriated into Buchenwald under the conditions described?
- A: That was what our Allied Military Government chose as a transfer point. Can you imagine...the sensitivity. They took these people, with all these hotels in town...enough so that they could designate them for field grade officers, captains only, lower officers, first three grade non-coms, all the press...all these were living in the hotels with Germans cooking for them. The whole hotels staff was still in tack. But these people...who had been slave laborers, and were being sent back to their countries...the best place they could think of to barrack them for the night...because most of the prisoners were out now...was on the things you saw (again, referring to the pictures), those shelves. That's where they were going to have them sleep.
- Q: Is that where they actually did sleep?
- A: That's where they stayed as far as we know.
- Q: They really did.
- Then after you delivered them to their destination, then you went back...?
- A: I don't have the slightest idea.
- Q: You went back to your company?
- A: They put us back on the trains, and we rode back.
- Q: Did the train go to the other side before disembarking the passengers.
- A: No.
- Q: So they had to get off and go whole through that...
- A: There was nothing we could see except the long, single-story...like a warehouse. Where if you pulled up a train and unloaded it, you see nothing but this big concrete deal. But when you walked out of the other side of that building. The building was no more than 20 or 30 feet wide...you came out the other side. Now there were rail sidings there and along that siding were all these bodies.
- Q: And they had to go past that?
- A: That's what happened.
- Q: Did you witness their reaction to this?

- A: No. Once we got off, we went through...and I just started wandering around the camp. They were still arguing about whether they were going to unload them or not when I left.
- Q: So you don't really know what happened at that point?
- A: Well, we didn't take them back. And no other trains came. So as far as I know...though our lieutenant and all the GI's that were there...but we had no authority or anything. We apologized to the Polish lieutenant and told him he was right. That we never should have let the people get off the train. But I suppose somebody would have forced them off. So that's my story...two sides of German people. Ones that were absolute bastards, and it happened all through Germany whether it was big cities, small towns or anything else. We had our fun. We crossed the river by assault moves at Vern Castle which is across the Mossell. And we took the city in the middle of the night. During the prior day we'd seen German troops there. We were on one side of the river, they were on the other. For three days we looked at each other. We crossed that night, scared to death because dogs would start barking and up into the town with cobble stones and we heard this very funny sound. The Germans had little flashlights with little generators in them. You'd squeeze the handle. The nearest thing I can tell you is...do you remember the children's toys that you squeezed and it spun a wheel and made sparkles.
- Q: Yes.
- A: Zip, zip, zip, zip. Little geared things. Well they had ones with little generators in it and the light would flare and die as they would squeeze it, because they didn't have batteries. Not enough batteries. And we saw...heard this sound, that you're familiar with, and saw this light coming down the road. And we backed into the doorways. In Vern Castle, the buildings were built around 1620 and most of the apartment houses were about six stories high. Cobble stone streets and they go up a story and they move up and they go up a story and they move up. By the time they're on the six floor they can almost reach across the street and shake hands. And people have lived in those apartments and in those homes continuously from the early 1600s.
- Q: Do they modernize them as the time goes on?
- A: Electricity was added, but you could see a piece of pipe...
- Q: What about plumbing?
- A: I supposed they'd been plumbed.
- Q: Well in the 1600s they threw their sewage out of the windows into the gutters.

A: They had indoor plumbing, some of them outdoor...the older places. But at any rate, we would back into the doorways and this light came down and somebody reached out grabbed this character and ground him out and scared the hell out of him. It was a doctor, he was on his way to deliver a baby.

Q: They let him go?

A: They sent someone with him. We also... when I told you that they could come out twice a day... one girl came with us... don't ask me the name of the town...but she was pregnant and was ready to deliver obviously. And what she wanted was permission for a midwife to come attend her. And we had a fellow who had been born and raised in Germany in our company... I don't know when he had come over...and he looked at her with a dead serious face and he said that was forbidden. You can only have the baby during the hours that you're allowed to have somebody come out. And I thought she was going to faint before someone said, he's just kidding.

They were rotten. It's very, very hard to believe that so called civilized, cultured people could turn like that, but it can happen. It can happen here.

Q: And it was intellegencia who sparked the whole bit?

A: No, it wasn't really.

Q: It wasn't?

A: No, they may have used it. But they weren't the ones that sparked it. They were low life's. The original Storm Troopers that backed up Hitler and all of that were really scum. Even he couldn't stand that scum so the original Brown Shirts, he wiped out. But look at... look at what the super men were, the pure Aryan race. Recall them, what they physically looked like... goebels, a little tiny dried up, club footed runt. All he could do was make kids, and he finally shot them, or no he poisoned... he and his wife poisoned their children and then shot themselves down in the bunker. Herman Goering, big fat pig on drugs. Himmler with his terrible eyesight, cut off black hair, looked like a stupid ox. None of them were the picture that they liked to portray of a fair-haired, blue-eyed try Aryan race. There wasn't one among them.

Q: You forgot Hitler

A: Hitler?

Q: When you described atypical...

- A: There wasn't one of them. But it could happen. And it could happen in this country, too. The same kind of prejudice and hatreds could come to the surface very readily. Look what happens with the KKK. Civilization is a very thin veneer.
- Q: I'm sorry that I have to agree with you.
- A: Well, that's my story. The pictures, Muriel said you'd like to have them unless you've already had this sort of thing to reproduce. I don't want to give that set up but I'll let you take them to have copies made, if you want to do that.
- Q: We want to take a picture of you too.
- A: What for?
- Q: We're hoping to put together...edit, put together and present about an hour tape to the schools and try and bring the Holocaust and what it was to the children.
- A: It's necessary. I have a 24 year old daughter and I told her you folks were coming... she's seen these pictures before. And we were out to dinner last night at a neighbors and they asked her, "What did you know about this? What did you... children your age... when you were in school...high school, what did you know about this...or college." And she said, "Well, from my dad, I knew the story." But she said, "I had a roommate one year younger than me and she knew absolutely nothing." Her parents were much younger. Father had not been in the service. She had no idea of what had gone on. And what she had heard, she was willing to accept the propaganda, the story that it wasn't really so, it never existed. But for the most part, children now... that are in their twenties... young people... don't really know these things. And I have to think back to the fact... my Dad was also an infantry man in World War I. And when I was a little kid I lived in Baltimore and he still had his World War I uniform and I used to play with the things... you know... the cap, the German hats, the souvenirs that he'd brought home. But it was like ancient history to me.
- Q: That's the same thing our children are going through.
- A: I was born in 1923; the war ended in 1917, but to me it may as well have been like the Civil War.
- Q: That's right.
- But our schools have been remiss that they have not taught this generation of young people about World War II and the conditions that prevailed and the situations that existed over there.
- A: They don't teach history anymore, really. They don't teach geography anymore.

They have some other names... combine these things. They don't dwell on it. It's too nasty. And look at the teachers. Who are the teachers? For the most part now, they're youngsters when they're teaching subjects like history and stuff and they don't really know it. They were little kids when it went on. So its... you got a generation... that unless this is passed on somehow, they wouldn't believe this stuff. It's just too horrible.

Q: This is where the Weisenthal foundation is so important in making sure it remains alive.

A: But now we're reaching really the end of the trail for the generation that experienced it. And it will fade away. I'm not sure if it should... stay forever... in other words don't punish the children for the sins of their parents. But to know what was done, to understand what an atrocity, what a horrible thing... that is what I think is necessary.

Q: Well this is why we're making these tapes. We want the story from the words of the survivors because as you point out they are a dying generation and we need to have a record of this so hopefully it will not happen again.

Have you ever been back to Germany?

A: Yes, I went back to Germany, back in 1967. I ran the export division of a large corporation, Parker-Hanna, Incorporation ... hydraulics and pneumatics, and we have operations all over the free world. And many of our plants are in Germany. I was in Cologne. And I was in Frankfurt, Bonn... they're modern cities, and it's a different time... what are you going to do? You can't keep fighting the war.

Q: What was your reaction as a Jew going back there?

A: I'll be honest with you. I hate the Goddamn German people. As an individual... I can meet them, and associate with them... but if I think of them collectively, I hate their guts. They were liars, they were boot lickers. When the war ended, and when it became obvious that it ended, everyone of them would tell you, "Eir nicht Nazi." That wasn't good enough to just say, "I wasn't a Nazi." What they had to do was finger someone, so they would say, "Eir nicht Nazi, but the guy over here," and they'd point out a neighbor's home or something, "he was a big Nazi." Now if you talk to him, he's pointing at the other guy. The other deal was, we were being split into areas of occupation and it was... if you were in the American zone, "We have no argument with the Americans, we love the Americans... but the English, those bastards... those Frenchmen, they're terrible... and the Russians are swine." But if you were in the French zone, they were telling the French, "Americans had no place over here. The French and Germans should be friends. The English are no good, and the Russians are swine." So, they were trying the split... do things... oh, I don't trust them. I don't trust them, and I don't like the Japanese either. Well, that's it.

A: Thank you very much.