

INTERVIEW WITH MR. WAYNE D. HANSON  
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League  
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

- Q: Mr. Hanson, could you tell us a little bit about yourself: when and where you were born - and then could you say something about your family, your community, your early years?
- A: I was born in the vicinity of Montevideo, Minnesota, and I graduated from high school in Benson, Minnesota, and from there I went into the service in 1943, and joined the 42nd Rainbow Division.
- Q: Could you tell us a little bit about what your family did for a living, and what the community was like.
- A: My father was with the R.E.A., the Rural Electrification Association, and my mother worked in a J.C. Penney store. There's nothing more I can add to that part of it. My parents moved from Benson to Granite Falls, which is their present address at this time.
- Q: What exactly was the R.E.A.?
- A: Well, maintaining and constructing of rural electrical facilities. In other words, all the electrical systems out in the rural areas. From there my father went on to Granite Falls, and started with Northern States Power, and he retired from there.
- Q: What year did you graduate from high school?
- A: 1942.
- Q: In the mid to late '30s, do you remember how aware people were in your community or your family of what was going on in Europe? The rise of Nazi Germany, and Hitler, and how people might have viewed it? Did they view it as a threat to the United States, a danger, something that would affect this country?
- A: (Sigh) Every once in a while something would crop up that would be kind of alarming, but I'm afraid people just didn't take it seriously. They just didn't think that this sort of thing was really happening. They heard it and they dismissed it. I guess probably because it wasn't at their back door or something. And I guess that's exactly what I did, too. I just didn't think that it was going to amount to what it did. That's about the size of it.

Q: So, did you enlist or were you drafted?

A: I enlisted. I was about to be drafted, so we supposedly were able to select - or have more of a selection - as a result of enlisting (Laughter).

Q: So you were 18 or 19 years old at that time?

A: 18.

Q: 18 years old and right out of high school, and you enlisted in the Army. Do you remember what it was like when war broke out in Europe in 1939? Do you remember that time? Do you remember how your family felt, what their attitude was?

A: There again, I think it was taken lightly, because it wasn't really affecting us too much, and we thought it was a terrible thing that was happening, and too bad, the same usual comments. But nobody got particularly excited about it.

Q: Did people speculate that the United States might enter the war because Great Britain and France declared war on Germany in 1939?

A: There was talk that, yes, it might be possible. But it just didn't look like it was going to be a very strong possibility in the near future.

Q: Do you think that people perceived Germany in 1939 at the outbreak of the war as a threat to the United States?

A: No I don't. Nobody seemed to be very alarmed.

Q: Can you tell me about your recollection of Pearl Harbor?

A: Well, Pearl Harbor was something that really put the American people to thinking and put 'em into gear, into action. Everybody that was eligible to do so, they wanted to do their part, because they'd had their feathers ruffled, and they wanted to square things up. And as far as the war in Europe was concerned, I think by that time, when we committed our forces, we were very ready to do what we had to do in order to stop this fellow in Germany, because obviously, he was getting way out of hand, way out of line. His motives for what he was doing, there wasn't any good reason for it. It was obvious that he had visions of delight as far as going after the world, and he needed to be stopped. And, as far as the Americans were concerned, they were ready to do it!

Q: Do you think even in late 1941, the people that you know saw Germany as a threat to the United States?

- A: I think perhaps we were starting to consider that a possibility, because he was just spreading out too much, and the trouble that he was giving England.
- Q: The years 1939, 1940, 1941, do you remember seeing anything in the newspapers or hearing anything over the radio about the nature of Germany's occupation of France and the various countries they took over?
- A: No. I don't recall anything like that.
- Q: Again, if we could get back again to the time you entered the armed forces, do you remember the day that you were inducted?
- A: I believe it was in June, 1943. I'm not sure of the date.
- Q: Could you tell me where you were inducted and where you went for basic training?
- A: I went to Minneapolis for the swearing in and so on, and from there we went to Camp Goobalah, Oklahoma and received our basic training, and stayed there until we were shipped overseas.
- Q: And it was after basic training that you were assigned to the 42nd Rainbow Division?
- A: No. We were in the 42nd Rainbow during our basic training, and what happened was that we had a lot of people that were shipped out, as replacements. And the 42nd didn't move out as a unit until a later date. We were prepared to go, but they didn't take everybody, they took like maybe, enlisted men who had a great deal of rank, and took cadres, so to speak, and so then they brought in some more people, and we trained them in turn. That happened a couple of times. Then, when we got to reserve strength, got everybody trained, we went as a unit.
- Q: What was your rank when you went overseas?
- A: I was a Staff Sergeant.
- Q: This was in the infantry?
- A: Right. Heavy weapons infantry, machine guns. In our company, there was two types of weapons. There was 81 mm mortars and there was a water-cooled 30-calibre heavy machine gun. I happened to be in the 2nd Platoon, which was a machine gun platoon.
- Q: Could you give me a little bit of what happened when you went overseas? Where you started, campaigns you were involved with, and if you could, try and

give me some dates and places, like where did you first land, what time of the year was it.

A: I can remember (laughter) very well the first time we went up to the front. It was on Christmas Eve, 1944. (Laughter) It wasn't a very good Christmas. On the 9th of December, we unloaded at Marseilles, France, and after spending a little time in a makeshift processing area, where we lived in tents on top of gravel, we proceeded to Strasbourg, which had been held by elements of the 36th Division. This was across the Rhine River from the German lines. We continued on about 10 miles further north to replace elements of the 79th Division, which had just withdrawn from the German border. Our first encounter with the Germans happened to be my section of machine guns. That was the 6th of January. We had withdrawn a short distance to stabilize our main line of resistance, and for our own safety, because we were kind of out on a point. We dug our gun positions, and right after we dug them, it seemed like fate was with us, because it snowed real hard, and so it covered up all our dirt.

Q: Were the Germans at this time attacking?

A: They were sending out patrols looking for us. It was a strong combat patrol of 20 Germans. They all had automatic weapons, they were in a half-track. This was early in the morning, and you couldn't see anything yet, but you could hear this clinking of the chains on the half-track, so I alerted my people and we watched and listened very carefully, trying to figure out what was going on. After a whole lot of noise and confusion and Germans talking and so on, we were able to make out forms coming our way, so I called the adjacent units and told them that they were proceeding right straight toward us, and that everybody should hold their fire until we opened up, because we could get 'em in a crossfire and put 'em out of commission. Which is what we did. All but two of them were dead. That was the first time we had encountered the Germans, so it worked out quite well for us.

Q: You were in charge of the platoon?

A: That was a section. My section of machine guns.

Q: How many men was that?

A: About 15, 16.

Q: What happened after that?

A: We were down in Hagenow area and we had our gun positions in a heavy woods and General von Rustedt was in front of us. This was the attack that was coordinated with Bastogne. They shelled us for three days and three nights and they knocked the entire woods down. We lost a lot of people - not necessarily so

many deaths as there were wounds from tree bursts. If you were in a hole, it didn't help you any, which is a bad thing about being in the woods, because they just shoot into the trees and they get tree bursts, and the rounds are much more effective than if they hit the ground. So we had 85% casualties.

Q: Were you wounded?

A: Not there. At a later time, yes.

Q: What happened after that?

A: Well, my platoon leader, Lt. Janke, was killed, on account of a little rescue mission. He was a real good personal friend of mine. He was the first officer in the 42nd Rainbow Division to receive the Distinguished Service Cross, so we were quite proud in spite of the loss. He was an officer that was one of the men. He didn't sit with the officers, and eat with the officers, he ate with the men. That was the kind of a guy he was. So he was real popular with the enlisted people, as you can understand. They all felt a real loss, when we lost him!

The next thing of any importance was that Task Force Linden was organized. This was an Army mobile unit designed to move fast. It had a lot of fire power. We did a lot of spearheading.

Q: At this time you were in Germany?

A: Yes.

Q: Were there any other major battles that you could tell us a little bit about?

A: Yes, we were in the city of Nuremberg. That was street fighting, and it was real difficult. They had cement pillboxes, a great deal of snipers, and tall buildings, so it was real difficult to finally get an area cleared out. You lost a lot of people in that type of fighting, and we did. The way you can get those snipers out was to bring up your tank destroyers and shoot 'em out of there, just obliterate the buildings.

Q: (Looking at photo) Where was this?

A: Schweinfurt, the ballbearing factory. We perched outside the city and we watched the Air Force totally annihilate the city. It was a sight to behold. (Laughter) All you could see was vapor trails from the planes. All of us were up on very high ground, and we looked down on this huge, sprawling city, and pretty soon everything turned to dust, and when the dust settled back down again, why it was gone! It was really weird! Those Air Force guys put those things just practically right the way they wanted 'em; they knew there was infantry dug in and around the city. Our next move was toward Nuremberg around the 18th of

March. That was a coordinated attack with the 45th Division. The two Divisions had organized and set up a trap which allowed us to encircle the city and slowly clean it out at our own discretion. We took a lot of prisoners in there. Things were getting bad, and they were really coming out. But by the same token, there was always a certain amount of diehards and you could never feel free in moving around, because they just kept shooting until you killed them.

Q: Let me ask you some other kinds of questions now, if I may. You had this experience, eventually, of what was considered to be a concentration camp liberator, a part of the military that came upon the concentration camps. During the time that you were in the service, did you hear or read or see any material about Nazi arrests, mass arrests of people, about deportations? Did you hear anything about concentration camps, about the treatment of prisoners or about civilians?

A: We had gotten some information relating to that, yeah.

Q: Do you recall what that was?

A: I think, probably, where most of our information came from at that time was the good old Stars and Stripes, the overseas paper and word of mouth from civilians.

Q: What civilians were those?

A: Your German nationals, and the French.

Q: Do you recall what they talked about, or what they told you? Can you recall what you read in the Stars and Stripes?

A: The German people, when they were talking about the concentration camps, all they would ever say about it that we could understand was that "alles todt," - "everybody's dead." I'm sure they said some things that if we could have understood, we'd have known a little bit more about what they were saying, but the only thing that we could ever make out about it is that nobody ever got out of there. Everybody died!

Q: Did it seem incredible to you at the time? A place where nobody ever came out alive?

A: This was getting to be more and more something that we almost feared! Because we just couldn't believe that such a place existed! It was hard to comprehend, such a thing. As far as Stars and Stripes is concerned, I saw they had some pictures - this was in France - of some people that were hanging in a concentration camp, and they had sewn their eyelids open, so the people could never close their eyes, and left them that way. And we saw some pictures of

people that they'd hung on meat hooks through the jaw, and left them to die like that, which of course took a long time.

Q: Did Stars and Stripes talk about this kind of treatment towards Jews or towards other groups like gypsies, like Communists?

A: The majority of the victims were the Jewish people, and there was a lot of Poles, and French. Some Russians. That constituted about all.

Q: Let me ask you, what camp or camps did you come upon? What was your experience as a liberator?

A: We were in this Task Force Linden, and on the 29th of April we entered the concentration camp of Dachau. And of course the thing that comes to my mind first of all, the thing that I see right away when I think of this place, is the trainload of human bodies, going into the prison, which was sitting on the tracks.

Q: There was a trainload of people that were arriving?

A: They had arrived there, yes. But they were all dead. Fifty-two cars of human beings.

Q: Was it that the cars were locked and they couldn't get out? Did they die of starvation?

A: They died of starvation. Those that tried to get out were machine gunned.

Q: Fifty-two cars of people. Do you know how many people were in each car?

A: So that when they laid down, why the floor was entirely covered - and piled up little bit on top of each other - so of course there was much more than what there should have been in there, you know. On this entire train, this line of boxcars - fifty-two boxcars - going into the prison, there was one survivor I walked by. I couldn't believe that I heard a noise, but I did hear a noise - I knew that later - I did hear a noise, and it was this survivor. It was this guy. Here he is. That's him. (Picture) I walked by, because I didn't believe there could be anybody alive, like this. This is the boxcars here, and there's the bodies!

Q: These were carloads of Jews, I can see. There's a Star of David on the boxcars. What led up to your coming into the camp? Do you remember what that day was like, where you came from? Did you approach the camp on foot?

A: This task force Linden was a mobile outfit. Our machine guns were mounted on vehicles, on jeeps, and that's how we got there first.

Q: So you were the first platoon to arrive a Dachau?

- A: As far as I know! There was nobody in front of us!
- Q: And, by the time you got there, the Germans had fled?
- A: Some of them had. We had a little trouble with sporadic fire, but by that time, of course, some had even put on prison clothes!
- Q: What was the very first thing that you saw upon entering what was the camp?
- A: That train.
- Q: Did you know immediately - you could tell - that there was something wrong about this?
- A: You just couldn't believe it! We just couldn't believe what we were seeing! These people being alongside the boxcars, that had been shot and falling off, and those that had all died on the inside and were hanging out of the door openings. We couldn't comprehend how bad these concentration camps were until we saw this thing! It's impossible until you see this - until you smell it! The smell is something you never forget!
- Q: They say that the survivors feel the same way - that it's the kind of experience that you can't ever describe. This is an important part of the interview right now. If you can, describe the physical layout of the camp, the grounds, any buildings. Do you remember seeing any kind of quarters, barracks, other facilities?
- A: Ah, yes. We saw the barracks. And they're like long warehouses, almost. We saw the crematoria. The ovens were warm yet.
- Q: Did you find any bodies or skeletal remains in the ovens, or ashes?
- A: There was ashes in the ovens, yes.
- Q: Can you remember how big the crematoria was? How many ovens you might have seen?
- A: It seems to me there was three ovens. When you're in the infantry, particularly if you're a spearhead, you secure the ground, the area, the territory, the real estate, whatever you want to call it, and move on! This, in fact, is what we really did do at this time. As much as we would like to have spent more time to witness all about this place, we just didn't because we had to move out! We were there about an hour - that's about all. And then of course, your other elements that come after you, they get to spend the time and take the pictures.
- Q: Do you recall seeing any survivors where you were in the camp?

- A: Yes. There were some survivors in the compound. And they kissed our feet.
- Q: Do you have any idea - I know you were there for a short time - how many survivors, approximately, do you recall seeing?
- A: This particular compound that we were in, I supposed there must have been 250, 300 in there. But there were others.
- Q: Do you remember what their physical condition was?
- A: Some of them were terrible. Some of them crawled! They were nothing but skin and bones! You wonder how a person could move, to make his body go.
- Q: When you say "skin and bones" do you mean that literally?
- A: You bet! I mean just nothing left! Nothing left!
- Q: Do you remember what their dress was?
- A: Ragged prison garb. Just rags of any kind. Some of it looked like burlap.
- Q: You said that most of them crawled...
- A: Crawled. And they helped each other. Some, who perhaps hadn't been there as long, were able to walk. Very thin, of course.
- Q: Were you able to communicate with any of them?
- A: Well, no! We had one Polack in the group and what a time he had, because there was some Polacks in there. And he talked with 'em in there, and that was a real moving thing, because they just cried and hugged him and kissed him, and it was just terrific. He, incidentally, had a nervous breakdown after this happened. This soldier, we had to send him to the rear, because he couldn't hack it any more.
- Q: You talked about the boxcars. Were there other dead that you saw?
- A: I should say!
- Q: Do you have any idea how many dead? And where did you find them in the camp?
- A: (Sigh) This one particular building, it may have been a place like after they were gassed or something, that they put them in. They laid them in a pile like that. These bodies were waiting fro the crematorium.

Q: Did you see the gas chambers?

A: We maybe did, but I didn't recognize them as being such. There again, the lack of time, and a chance to go over things like you'd like to - we weren't able to do it.

Q: Getting back to the boxcars. You said that there were 52. Do you have any idea, on the average, how many people were in a boxcar?

A: (Sighing) What should I say ...

Q: Were there 50? Were there 100?

A: I'd like to say 50. This European boxcar is smaller than ours. There they call 'em the "40 & 8." So 50 people in there would be very crowded! They'd be just stuffed in there like animals.

Q: Were there any guards, or any other personnel, in the camp when it was liberated?

A: There was some, yes. I never could figure out exactly why they stuck around. But there were some of them that did. They gave us a little trouble, which we were able to overcome. The prisoners were real happy to "accommodate" them when we left.

Q: How many would you say?

A: This one particular group was about 10.

Q: Were they guards? In German uniforms?

A: Some of them had prison garb on. They put it on in an attempt to get away with something, or to get out of the camp perhaps. We were never quite sure why they were there when we got there - but they were.

Q: Can you describe them, and their behavior at all?

A: They were real arrogant. Like we were doing something wrong and we were interfering at this camp! It didn't appear to them like they had any kind of guilt at all! It's like, everything was perfectly normal, and what were we doing there?

Q: Did that seem incredible to you at the time?

A: Oh, it absolutely did! No way we could understand such a thing. We couldn't figure what kind of people they were. We couldn't believe it! The German

people that we had come in contact with were very normal people. Exactly like us! With the exception of these. They weren't people. (Pause) I don't know how one man can become so calloused toward another man and have absolutely no compassion and regard for feelings! The punishment inflicted on these people was just absolutely (groans) indescribable! They had this sex doctor, too, in Dachau, and for all practical purposes guess he must have been nearly insane, because some of the terrible things that he performed...

Q: Do you recall who that was?

A: I don't remember the doctor's name.

Q: It wasn't Mengele, was it? Mengele is a rather infamous doctor who performed all kinds of experiments...

A: I can't be sure. I can't give you a good answer, because like I say, if I'd had more time at the camp, I could have gotten acquainted with a little bit of what was happening there.

Q: Again, when you got into the compound, aside from the boxcars, did you know that most of the inmates there were Jewish?

A: Not really. They were so emaciated, you couldn't really tell what they were as far as their appearances, you know.

Q: Sometimes some of the prisoners wore the Star of David on their prison clothing.

A: Yes, that's true. Yes, some of them did have them. But by the same token, a lot of them didn't have them, too. It had gotten to the point in life to where even that wasn't important anymore, you know, so many didn't have it. But there was always a majority there, of course, of Jewish people.

Q: Again, you said that for the most part there wasn't any communication; can you recall anybody in the unit that was able to communicate with any of these?

A: Yes! My commander of this unit that I was in, Captain Wolfert, was a full-blooded German, and spoke it very fluently, and he of course could converse.

Q: With the survivors?

A: Yeah. Now some of the survivors that were in there, of course, they had been in Germany enough, and around Germans and so on, so that they could handle the German language good enough to get by.

Q: By way of your commander, did you hear what any of the survivors said to you or to your commander about their experience?

- A: There again, we were unable to take the time for an interview. The only thing that may have been said was a simple thing like, "How long have you been here?" or "Where are you from?" or so on. And they were so overjoyed in seeing somebody else that they were just beside themselves.
- Q: In the short time you were there, did you or any of your group come upon any records or documents or photographs or films or similar materials in the camp that might have been the property of the Germans, the Nazis?
- A: I understood that, yes, that they did get hold of some documents. We did not. It was not our job. We couldn't understand why the documents hadn't been burned.
- Q: Who are "they?"
- A: The people in the rear echelon. Maybe your regimental headquarters, your division headquarters, units that can only operate in your rear areas because of the nature of their work.
- Q: So, specifically, you wouldn't be able to tell us exactly what these documents were or what was done with them or where they are now?
- A: No, we didn't handle them. I couldn't tell you where they are at now. I did hear that there were some documents that had been uncovered by our people, and I don't know the nature of them now, or where they are.
- Q: What happened right after you left Dachau? You said you were there for about an hour, then you had to move on?
- A: We moved out. We moved outside of the city, and we stopped. Our reason for doing that sort of thing is if there's a counterattack or something, we were there to stop that kind of thing. And then we proceeded down to Munich, and we were in Munich as a reserve force, so we had a little bit of a breather spell. It had been a long time since we had had that.
- Q: Let me just ask you, your war experience in general and certainly your experience in Dachau, do you think it had some kind of impact on your life? Do you think it changed your thinking, or do you think it changed your life in any kind of way?
- A: I think, probably it allowed me to mistrust people a little bit more than I ever did before, after seeing how they can become to one another. I think I lost a lot of trust in people.

Q: Was it difficult for you to contemplate going back to war when you were called back and went to Korea?

A: Because I knew where I'd been! You bet! The worst time in my life was when I was on that ship, after we left California, and we went on to Korea. That was bad, because I knew! A lot of the young guys who were on there, they didn't know where they were going, what was going to happen.

Q: People like you, though - people who have survived the war - in the sense that you were witness to man's inhumanity.

A: I'm happy to be alive so that I can shed any light on this material for these archives. I'm real happy to be able to be a part of it.