

Interview with William Kamman
By Rhonda Lewin
March 12, 1987

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is Rhoda Lewin and I'm interviewing William Kamman for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust Oral History Project. If you'd begin, Mr. Kamman, by telling me when you were born and where you went to school, where you grew up.

A: I was born in April, 1924, in St. Paul. Grew up in St. Paul. Lived there all my life. Graduated from Marshall High School and the University of Minnesota.

Q: This, then would have been 1939 when you graduated from high school?

A: No, I graduated in 1941.

Q: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

A: I was drafted and I went into the service in June of 1943.

Q: When, where?

A: I went to Ft. Riley, Kansas, basic training, and was assigned to a reconnaissance unit, and then spent some time on the west coast, and then went to Texas for combat training, and went overseas December, 1944. To Europe.

Q: What unit were you with and when and where did you land?

A: We were a kind of unit by itself, and that was the 107th Reconnaissance unit. We landed at Le Havre and then got assigned, to, I think, the 101st Airborne. I think we joined them just as they were breaking out of the Bulge. And then, somehow or other, we got assigned to the 10th Armored division. It's a little vague at this point, as to the sequence and the units and so forth, but we ended up moving across the Rhine and into Germany.

Q: Which battles, which cities?

A: I know we were in Strasbourg, that's where we crossed the Rhine. I don't recall some of the other towns that we went through. I know as the war was starting to

wind down we did end up for some time in the Alps. Brenner Pass, I guess it was called.

Q: Now this was already moving towards spring, about March?

A: The only thing I remember about it is that there was snow. But I just don't remember the sequence of events.

Q: Now, you said you arrived at Dachau. Had you read in Stars and Stripes about the concentration camps, or had you heard anything about them?

A: I don't know how I knew about them. I was thinking about that and I just don't know how I knew about 'em. But I did know about them for some reason or another. I'm not sure that any of us knew the extent of it. This probably would have been like April of '45, I would guess. Things were moving fairly quickly at that point, and we were a reconnaissance unit so we were generally ahead of everybody else most of the time.

Q: What did a reconnaissance unit do?

A: Basically you were out there riding along in your jeeps and armored cars, trying to determine where the enemy was in advance of other units, and radioing back. We used to go on scouting missions at night, and those got a little bit scary.

Q: What rank were you?

A: Corporal.

Q: Were you on a reconnaissance when you came to Dachau?

A: I don't know.

Q: Try to walk me through it, then. How did you get there, and what were your feelings? As much as you can remember.

A: It's very vague at this point. As I say, we were moving quite rapidly at that point, and we moved into the Dachau area, along with other troops. And the people were coming out of the camp, and it just seems like there was a lot of confusion at that point, and there was just a lot of people.

Q: American soldiers?

A: There was a lot of American soldiers and there was just a lot of people coming out of the camp, and there was civilians and there's Germans. I recall I chose not to go into the camp, and again, at this point, I don't know why. I don't remember that I realized at that point or how I realized at that point, what was going on. The

only thing I did know was that these people who were coming out of the camps in their blue and white striped robes were Jews and so it had particular significance to me and when they would come out of the camps, the first thing they were doing was looking for food. They were in the garbage cans and everything else, and of course we had rations which we gave to them, and most of the soldiers did, as a matter of fact, but the most amazing thing to me was the fact that some of those people were still able to walk, because they looked like they were dead. But still they were walking, and they were surviving, and they were looking for food.

Q: Can you describe what they looked like? Draw me a word-picture.

A: They were just very thin and emaciated looking people. I mean, the thinnest people I have ever seen. The most emaciated people that I had ever seen. There was a lot of confusion and a lot of emotion going on at that point because they were being released. We were effectively moving to mop up at that point, and I don't even remember how long we were there. But we left the area shortly thereafter. That's the last contact I had.

Q: And you don't remember what else you thought, what else you felt, when you were standing outside those gates.

A: No, I really don't. I think that we were so much involved in the war, and trying to survive, and as I said, things were moving very rapidly at that point, and we liberated not only the people in Dachau but there were many other forced labor groups that we liberated, Poles and whatever they were. So there were just lots of people wandering the countryside, and one of the things I do remember is that we were also at that time hunting for SS men. Again, we were a reconnaissance unit and we were out somewhat by ourselves. We knew that the SS men had escaped into the forests, and we had also captured lots of weapons, pistols and small arms weapons, and we turned those over to all these refugees that were wandering the countryside, and told them to go look for the Germans. (Laughs) It's kind of interesting, because they would go into the forests and pretty soon you'd hear shots, which was okay with us.

Q: These were camp personnel.

A: These were forced labor that had been in labor camps.

Q: No, I mean the SS people.

A: I don't know who they were. They were identified as SS people, and I suppose they were supervisors and upper echelon, because the other thing, too, is that when you get into April of '45, the German army consisted of everything. They were old people and kids, and cripples, and disabled people. They were still fighting but with make-shift type outfits and weapons. So there were lots and lots of prisoners being taken. There was just a lot of people. We were advancing

quite rapidly at that point, and things were really breaking down fast, maybe towards the second half of April. The war was effectively over, it was a matter of mopping up.

Q: The war ended on May 8, officially.

A: Right. But it was really over before that, and it was a matter of mopping up. So we were involved in the mopping up exercise. I remember giving weapons to all of the refugees and saying, "Here, you go find them." We had enough of going looking for them, and if we found 'em, fine, and if we didn't... That's basically what I remember about that era.

Q: You were giving these people your K-rations to eat. Were you also giving them some clothing?

A: I don't think so. No, I think it was mostly whatever rations we had. We had no problem getting more of course; it was just giving them food. There was still little or no communication with them that I can remember.

Q: You didn't find anybody, you didn't talk to any ex-prisoner who spoke some English?

A: No, actually we had assignments, and we didn't have the time to just sit there and observe.

Q: You didn't have time to chat.

A: Yes. The war went on, you know. This was just part of it, and there were units that were coming in behind us that were going to take care of the resettlement and everything, and we just continued on because, we were a part of the initial units that were moving ahead.

Q: You don't have any specific recollections about the labor camps.

A: No, not really. I just remember certain things about it. We just gave 'em their weapons and said, "You go find 'em," and we just continued on.

Q: When were you discharged from service?

A: Well, the war ended in May, officially, and we ended up in a place I think that was called Lechbruk. And then we got transferred to a camp outside of Marseille, France, because we were going from Europe to Japan with the invasion which supposedly was going to take place in November of '45. We sailed out of Marseille like August 10th or 11th of 1945 and when the war ended we were on our way through the Panama Canal, or in that direction, and the war ended and

they sent us back to the states. We landed in Virginia, and we were all given 45-day furloughs, and then I was assigned to Camp McCoy.

Q: In Wisconsin.

A: Yeah. Awaiting discharge, and I was doing different administrative work, and that was a discharge center. But I was discharged in December of 1945, based on points. I don't remember how many points were involved.

Q: You got points for how many months you'd been in combat. And then you came to the University of Minnesota.

A: Well not right away. I worked for a cousin of mine. We were going to open up a plant in California and one cousin went out to look for a plant and I worked for another cousin here, learning the business, and that broke down, so I ended up starting university in the fall of '46. And I graduated in July of '49.

Q: That was what we used to refer to as "The Year of Our Veteran One" at the University. It was when all the servicemen came home and started college on the G.I. Bill. That's interesting, because I knew you then, and I remember that some of the fellows would talk about some of them had malaria, some of the ones who'd been in the South Pacific; sometimes, rarely, they would talk about their experiences, but did you ever talk to anybody about what you had seen in the concentration camp?

A: No. We never talked about it. We'd talk about incidents that took place, but as a general rule, it was seldom we talked about what went on. I guess we wanted to get on with our lives. We just wanted to be home.

Q: And so you've never talked to anybody about this.

A: No. Not really.

Q: Not discussed it with your wife, or your children.

A: Not as a general rule. You know, somehow or other, it might come up in a conversation.

Q: A lot of fellows took pictures. You were not taking any pictures at that point.

A: No.

Q: The last thing I usually ask people when I'm interviewing them is, what did I forget to ask you? Is there something else you would like to talk about, that's come to your mind? How do you evaluate this?

- A: How do I evaluate the experience of being in the service and seeing all of that? The whole thing? Not for publication.
- Q: You mean you want me to turn the tape recorder off?
- A: No, I guess I don't want to comment on it, because I have my own feelings about it, as I'm sure most Jewish people do. It's a peculiar situation, in that there's no way that I would want to go through that experience again, and yet there's no way you can substitute that experience. And it frankly took a long time to get over it, and there were many nights when I used to have nightmares. I didn't realize it, I didn't realize that I was that affected by the war, but I know that for some time I would wake up from bad dreams about the war, and I would also have bad dreams about being drafted again, and that type of thing. It goes on for a lot of years. Just occasionally, it's nothing serious or anything like that, but it's amazing how it pops back in your head every once in a while. A lot of the relationships that you develop with other people and then you get out of the service and they eventually disappear and you go on with your life, that's what happens.
- Q: Has it meant anything, do you think as a Jew, as a member of the Jewish community? Has it made any difference, do you think, to you, in your feeling about being a Jew and being a member of the Jewish community?
- A: Oh, I suppose it has, but I think I've always felt very Jewish, not necessarily observant, but I've grown up in a Jewish community and spent most of my youth at the Jewish Center in St. Paul, and high school was half Jewish, and so I've always felt very Jewish. I've also always felt that Jews are very unique people.
- Q: In what way?
- A: Well, that's not good or bad, but, well, I don't know how to explain it. First of all, the fact they survived, that's number one. And there is a feeling between Jews that I don't understand, because if you go anywhere and you run into a Jew, you feel like you've run into a relative, you know. And if something happens to someone that's Jewish you have a totally different reaction than if that person is not Jewish. I don't know how to explain it, nor have I spent any time trying to figure it out, but it's just a part of being Jewish. We have some kind of bond that exists between us whether we know each other or not. That doesn't mean that all of us love each other, but there's something special that exists with most Jewish people, and I don't know what it is. Maybe it's the fact that we know what our background is, and we know that we were all subject to anti-Semitism as we were growing up. So maybe that's part of it. And historically we know what's happened to the Jews, and the Holocaust, the whole thing -- how these people survived -- but they have.
- Q: Do you know any Holocaust survivors? Do you include them among your friends?

A: Well, the Eigers, of course. And Dora Zaidenweber. [Kamman and Zaidenweber are accountants with the firm of Lurie, Eiger and Besikof. Dora Zaidenweber is David Eiger's sister.]

Q: But you don't discuss this with them.

A: No, I really haven't. As a matter of fact, David and Barbara Eiger invited Gloria and me out to dinner, I suppose it was 1985, because it was the fortieth anniversary of the liberation, and they invited us out to dinner because I was part of the units that liberated David. But generally we don't have any discussion about it, and there may be others that I know that were in one of the camps. Off hand I don't know who they are.

Q: You mentioned in passing that you had known anti-Semitism growing up in St. Paul. Do you remember any specific incidents or just a feeling, or things your parents talk about?

A: It was just incidents. That's all. With contemporaries, non-Jewish contemporaries. We used to run into it in playing sports. I played all the sports at school, and we used to run into it, comments that were made because we were so Jewish-dominated as far as the players, and so we ran into it quite a bit playing sports, and you just ran into it every once in a while, and defended yourself.

Q: Physically, or verbally?

A: Both. We were kind of tough kids growing up. It's kind of interesting.

Q: Which high school did you say you went to?

A: Marshall. Marshall was a junior high, then went to a high school, then went back to a junior high. It was a high school from 1940 through 1946, or something like that.

Q: Do you have any feelings about Germans?

A: Yeah. I have lots of feelings about Germans.

Q: You want to tell me about them?

A: I don't like them. I have a very difficult time with them. I have a German client, from Hamburg, and he's a young man, middle, late 30's, and he's very bright and he's very nice. He's been very good, he's been a very good client. I have some difficulty in dealing with him, but that's my problem. And I try to be more rational about it, in that he's a different generation. He's a very interesting guy because his father -- he comes from a very wealthy family -- his father is in the

grain business, and his father apparently has, and had a lot of Jewish friends. So he told me stories of how his father used to tell his Jewish friends to get out, and how his father goes to Israel, and sees some of his friends, and apparently, they also own some hotels in Israel. It's a very wealthy family. I have difficulty with him, but that's my problem, not because of him, you know, because he's a very nice guy. But I don't like him. I mean, I don't like German people. I dislike them, as a matter of fact, mainly because of being Jewish and knowing what happened.

Q: Do you ever reflect on how they could have done what they did?

A: Well, it's impossible to understand, except it can happen, obviously. You get some stories --as a matter of fact my German client told me about basically what was going on in Germany and that the Jews really put Hitler in power. The voting choices were such that they voted for him, and the Jews were landowners, real estate owners, landlords, and so forth, and Germany was in a depression, so it was ripe for hostility against the Jews, who were probably upper class, upper middle class economically. But I don't know how those things happen. I think most people chose to ignore it, or were afraid to do anything about it. I think people are basically pretty much the same wherever you go, you know; that's the scary part about it, because it did happen there, and people did ignore it, and they had their own problems at the time. The Germans were in a depression, and there was a war going on, and how can anybody explain it? You can't.

Q: If you could visualize giving that kind of power over you to those kids in high school who were calling you names. If they had the power to do what they wanted.

A: Yeah, sure it could happen. There's still plenty of it out there now. Of course, we're now more subtle. Hopefully the world is more civilized. I don't really think it is, because there are areas of the world where they kill people like crazy. Life is cheap, but it's not cheap to us. So I don't understand it, and at this point it's not my job to understand it. I deal with it, but I can't spend a lot of time on it.

Q: I thank you for sharing your thoughts and your feelings with us. Thank you.