

INTERVIEW WITH MR. WILLIAM C. LANDGREN
BY RHODA LEWIN
January 26, 1987

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

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is Rhoda Lewin, interviewing Bill Landgren, on January 26, 1987, for the Holocaust Oral History Project. Your name is William Landgren, and were you born here in Willmar?

A: No, I was born in Ft. Dodge, Iowa. I'm seventy years old, now. I went to Iowa State College - in those days - it's Iowa State University now and graduated in agronomy. Got a job with Pioneer Hybrid Corn Company, and worked with them until I retired here, back about five or six years ago. While I was working for 'em, of course, the war came about, and I was drafted in February, 1942. That's always one date I can remember. (Laughs)

Q: Were you in Willmar then?

A: No, I was in Des Moines. I was working for 'em in Des Moines. So I was drafted out of Des Moines. Of course, when I was at Iowa State I took ROTC for two years in the field artillery, so I had some little background on field artillery when I was drafted. They interview you, and try to decide where they're going to place you, and so I thought, "It's a cinch I'll get in the field artillery, which won't be so bad." So they interview you and then they pack you on a train, and they won't tell you where you're going, and so we were sitting in the train until after it got started, and then the sergeant walked down the aisle and I got ahold of him, and pulled his shirt sleeve and I said, "Where are we going, Sergeant?" He says, "You're going to Camp Forrest, Tennessee." And I says, "Is that where the field artillery is?" He says, "You're in the infantry now, brother. You're in the infantry, now." (Laughs) So I was a "gravel agitator" all during the war. At Camp Forrest I had the opportunity to go to Officers' Candidate School in Georgia so I took that, so I was a 90-day wonder and graduated as a second lieutenant in the infantry in 90 days, went to Camp Clayborn, Louisiana, and was there for six months or so, and then I volunteered for overseas duty, so I was sent overseas. That was in 1943 sometime, I guess.

Q: And that was to England.

A: We were just a group of replacements. So we went to South Africa, Casablanca, and then from there I was assigned to the 45th Division, which was in Italy at the time. So that's where I started, in Italy.

Q: So you fought in the Italian campaign.

A: Through the Italian. I was in five campaigns. through the Italian, and then we made an amphibious landing on Anzio - I was with the 45th Division which landed on Anzio - and spent three months there, and broke out of there, went to Rome, took Rome, and then we went back in a rest area, and then we were in on the southern France invasion. So we came into southern France in the amphibious landing, and worked our way on up to the time when we went into Munich, and then the war ended shortly after we went into Munich. And of course, going into Munich, we went through Dachau, and that's how that happened. After we got in Munich - of course, there was very little resistance there - and they were shuffling troops around, they sent our company back to Dachau to spend a week or ten days until they could decide when we'd get to go home. I spent about a week there at Dachau. Just looked around. During the campaign I'd picked up an old camera - I've got it in here, a beat-up old thing - and we ran onto a boxcar with German photograph supplies. it was just all coincidence, and I picked up fifteen, twenty rolls of 35 mm film that they were using. They had to leave it and couldn't move it. So I got a lot of pictures. I took quite a few pictures in Dachau and in the war in general, the last part of it.

Q: I'd like to see some of those pictures when we're done talking. Before we talk about Dachau, when did you join up with the troops that had come in on Omaha Beach on D-Day?

A: We didn't join up with them. We went up along southern France, along Switzerland, across the Maginot Line - there wasn't nothing to that - then to Austria and Germany. We went through Nuremberg and in that area.

Q: Would you like to tell me now what you found when you went to Dachau? When did you arrive in Dachau?

A: It must have been in May of '45.

Q: How many days before you arrived had it been liberated? Were you the first soldiers in there?

A: I was in there about a half hour after it was liberated.

Q: What kind of reception did you get?

A: The first thing we saw when we came in was a train. It must have been thirty-five or forty box cars - coal type cars and enclosed box cars - full of dead. As I understand it, the Germans, as our troops were coming along, were trying to keep these people up ahead so that we wouldn't know what was going on. That was really a pitiful sight, and I have pictures I can show you of that train and the bodies. They're all dead and there had been a snowfall the night before, and

some of them were covered with snow. It's kind of a gruesome sight. Then we just followed that track into Dachau. And I'd just guess it was probably an hour or so after it fell. There wasn't much fighting. The security guards didn't put up much of a battle. When we came in there, we ran into a cluster of German dead, the guards, then there'd be another little cluster of 'em, up there.

Q: Who had killed the guards?

A: The troops that came in, and as I understand, there was a work detail of inmates working outside the wire enclosure and when the troops came in, they grabbed rifles from them and did a little shooting themselves. Now, that's just what I heard. I didn't see it, and I didn't know for sure if it happened. It was possible. But they were all back on the other side of the wire, and I'm sure they knew what was going on.

Q: Can you walk me through the camp? Can you describe what it was like?

A: I didn't get inside the wire. They wouldn't let us inside the wire. But the crematorium was several hundred yards away from the camp, and as we came in, as I told you, we saw these German security guards dead there, and we just walked on down to the crematorium. Outside the crematorium was a huge pile of bodies - I suppose twice the size of this room - and I have pictures of those I can show you, too, and they were all dead.

Q: Twice the size of this room. I'm thinking, how big is this room? It's about 12 by 15, and it has maybe a ten foot ceiling.

A: Some of these photos were starting to fade a little bit, so I've been keeping 'em in the dark. Here, you can look at them. That's the train I told you about seeing. You can see how long it is.

Q: There they all are, just in there dead. Fifty box cars of dead, May, 1945. And there they are, piled up outside. You've written here, "Russians, Poles, Dutch, Belgians. Ministers, priests, political prisoners."

A: There were some Jews there but that was really not where they were concentrated. There were plenty of Jews there, but not as many as in some of the other concentration camps. Here's the dogs that they had.

Q: And here are the pictures, you brought people from the town.

A: Oh, yeah. There was a town of Dachau. I'd say it was two or three miles away, and of course those people claimed they didn't know what was going on. So they brought them out here and made them bring their wagons and their horses and teams. Inside the crematorium there was also a room full of bodies and they were starting to deteriorate. You can see how thin they were.

Q: Oh, yes. Just skeletons.

A: And one of them was using an ice tongs to pick them up.

Q: There's the picture of the ice tongs that they used to pick the bodies up.

A: And then they made them, with their wagons, parade through the town of Dachau with them and then I think they were buried in a mass grave outside of town. That's the shower bath. At Dachau, they did not gas them. They were set up to gas but they didn't ever use it. This old fellow here - this is inside the crematorium. I think there were six of these ovens. And this guy stayed. The rest of them all took off; they put 'em back inside. But anyhow, he stayed, and just kept right on. That was his job, to cremate the bodies. He just kept right on doing it, and I says, "Can I take a picture?" He came down there and he stood by the door and he showed me.

Q: You mean they were still burning bodies?

A: Oh, yeah. He was the only one, but...(laughs) This is what they fed 'em. I understand they got a third of a loaf of bread two times a day. That's the train that's going to Dachau. Now here's a shot of the inmates. Here's one standing right by the gate there. He's standing back there talking.

Q: Could some of them speak English? Or could you speak some German?

A: I don't know. No, I couldn't speak any German.

Q: So you didn't talk to any of them. But you could see what had been going on.

A: Actually, Bill Borth said I was a liberator, well actually I was not a liberator, because I just came in after it was taken care of, and got these pictures.

Q: You said you were there for a couple of hours, and then you went away and then you came back.

A: No, we just came in there. I was commander of a machine gun, a warrant platoon, or heavy weapons company, in the 179th infantry regiment, in the first battalion. The riflemen are first and then we follow behind. So they were in first and took it, and I just came in with my company after. I understand it took about a half hour to liberate the camp, to get everybody inside, so there wasn't too much fighting. And that was it.

Q: When you came in were the inmates just milling around?

A: They were all by the fence looking. I suppose they'd calmed down some.

- Q: Did you look in any of the buildings?
- A: They wouldn't let me inside. This fellow in Atwater, (Glen Stranberg), didn't he get inside?
- Q: Yeah. He was a medic. Did you try to give them anything to eat or anything like that?
- A: No, we didn't because there was an army unit that took care of all that.
- Q: I see. They'd come in already.
- A: Well, that was when I'd come back. We went through Dachau and went on to Munich, and when that fell, and everything was taken care of, I suppose maybe a day, two days later, my company was sent back to Dachau, and we were billeted in these rooms.
- Q: Where did you stay then?
- A: We stayed right outside the camp. See, I sent these films home to my folks at the end of the war, and when I got home I sorted them out the best I could.
- Q: You didn't stay in any of the camp buildings, you stayed in the town?
- A: No. We stayed in kind of an apartment building.
- Q: But you did stay there for one week.
- A: Yeah, I suppose it was about half a mile from the camp.
- Q: Did you have any contact with the camp or with the prisoners then when you came back?
- A: Nope. All we were there was in case they had any problems, we were to help control them. Well, there was no problems, and so what I did, some of these pictures I took as we went through, and a lot of these, of course, I took after we came back. See, that's the crematorium there.
- Q: So you sent these films home. Were you married then?
- A: No.
- Q: Your mother and father you sent them to.
- A: In Fort Dodge.

Q: What did they say?

A: Well, when I got back, they gave me the pictures. They got 'em all right, so they took 'em down to the photographer and told him to develop them; they didn't know what was on them. The photographer developed them and when he saw what they were, he made a display in his window, and had them stuck up there. (Laughs) He asked my mother if he could hold them for a few days and just put 'em up there. So that's what he did.

Q: Did your mother ever tell you how the people reacted to these photos in Fort Dodge?

A: Well, I don't know. Fort Dodge is a pretty good sized town. No, she never said anything, but of course, she wouldn't even look at 'em, after she saw what they were. She didn't want to look at them.

Q: That's an understandable reaction. That's one of the things I wondered. When you came back from the war, did you talk about these things, and show these pictures?

A: I had no interest, I made no conscious effort to remember what I saw, and when I got back I didn't try to forget what I remember. For a good many years - I was married shortly after I came back - I was involved with my work and my married life and I was happy and I never thought about this for quite a few years. We moved frequently, and this book followed along with us, and I knew for a long time it was upstairs in the attic, and then I got to thinking, so I went up and got it and I thought, "Boy, I'm lucky all these things haven't faded out and are gone." So about seven or eight years ago, I suppose, I had it down here and I'd show it to some of the people who would come and visit - our friends around here. Dr. Hanson, the dentist up here, was on the school board, then. I think he was president of the school board, and he got ahold of Bill Borth and told him, "I bet he's got some film there, some pictures that you'd like to see." So Borth got hold of me, and we got together, and I showed him these pictures. He had one of the prosecutors for the Dachau trials with him, an attorney, a lawyer that was involved. Did you know about him?

Q: Well, there's a Bob Matteson who was there. And I think this was somebody named Hanson, wasn't it?

A: I believe that's right. His name was Hanson. So they came and looked at them, and he wanted to know if he could take the book, so they made some slides from some of these pictures, and that's what Bill Borth is using, in his class. And I've got slides here that he had made.

Q: You have children?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you ever talk to your wife and children about these things? Did the kids ever find the picture book?

A: No. I've showed it to the oldest boy. I don't recall that they had showed any interest in it. I never showed it to the kids. I didn't care about talking about it, or going out of my way to discuss it.

Q: That's understandable.

A: I tried to keep in contact with a couple of my friends that I knew in the army and I did see one of 'em here seven or eight years ago, he was at Rochester. He lived in Ohio and he was down in Rochester, he had trouble with arteries in his legs, and he had surgery down there. We always sent Christmas cards every year, so he called from there and wanted to know if I'd be home. And I said, "You bet your life I'll be home." So when he got in town, he gave me a ring and I was out working, but I came in and met him, and he stayed overnight and I showed him this book. He's in here, in some of these places, and we had a nice talk and we enjoyed it, and I'm glad he came, because he died at Christmas time that same year. I suppose that was three or four months after he left here, and he was dead.

Q: You were in the service with Jewish soldiers, too.

A: Yes, I can remember one young Jewish soldier who was a medic.

Q: How did Dachau hit him?

A: That boy, I knew when we were on Anzio. I also knew a Jewish officer, but I didn't know him too well, and he was captured, but I think he came out of it all right.

Q: Then you weren't in Dachau with any.

A: Jewish soldiers? No, not that I know of. I'm sure there were some, but I didn't know 'em.

Q: Do you ever think about, or try to explain to people or explain to yourself, how something like this could happen, or why it happened?

A: Well, it's hard to understand. When I got in there, I suppose it was almost three years that I'd been in service and I'm used to seeing dead soldiers from battle, but when you come into something like this, the train kind of hits you, you know. When you look at that train and they're sitting there and you know darn well they

didn't have a chance, they had nothing to eat; they apparently starved to death. That's what it looked like. That hits you. And then you see those bodies piled up there, and then there's one here that looked like it was a little girl's head sticking out of a pile, and that was one of the slides Bill Borth took, and he had blown it up so just the head showed, with the rest of the bodies around it. And it looked just like a little girl, but I didn't think there was any children at all in Dachau. It all looked to me like they were adults.

Q: That's why all the people who survived are all about the same age now, because if you were under fourteen they usually killed you right away. And of course, if you were over twenty-five or thirty you didn't survive, for the most part, so it tended to be the older teenagers, and the young people.

A: Here it is. Doesn't it look to you like it's a girl? It may not be. But they blew it up and they were showing it in the entrance way, when they had the big doings here.

Q: That was in October, when you had the Holocaust program.

A: In October, that's right. And I'll tell you, they turned them away. (Laughs) Thousands, you know. And Bill Borth came to me and asked, "Would you mind saying a few words? We're just gonna get the parents together, there'll be a few there, and maybe they'll ask you some questions." So I said, "Yeah, sure, I wouldn't mind doing that." It just got built up and built up, and he says, "Well, we've kind of opened it up to the public. Anybody who wants to come, that'll be all right." So they didn't expect that many, but they came and they were standing outside, they couldn't get in the auditorium, they were standing along the sides, they were standing everywhere, and a lot of people just turned around and went back home.

Q: Now, Willmar's a town of 23,000 but is a much larger trading area. You're the center for a big area. But why would that many people be interested, do you suppose?

A: Well, I tell you, a lot of it is due to Bill Borth. His kids are really interested in it. He's an excellent teacher. He's just excellent. And they are very interested. In fact, his students more or less ran this thing. He turned it over to them and they took care of a lot of it and they were very enthusiastic and did a nice job on it. They'd go home and they'd tell their parents about it and their parents talked to somebody else, so quite a few people in town knew who Bill Borth was and that he taught this Holocaust class. So I think Bill Borth is the one that's kept it alive and got people thinking about it, and he got me more interested in it. I did a little more thinking about it, too.

Q: Do you get any feedback from people. Do they say, "Say, I heard you talk?"

- A: Yes. By the way, there is a Jewish family here - when you get to my age, you start forgetting names - but I know him real well, and he saw me on the street - this is several years ago - I think he heard it from Doc Hanson or somebody - he says, "Can I look at 'em?" I says, "Sure." So I let him look at the book. He brought it back, and he was real impressed. He thought it was awful and I can see why, you know.
- Q: But, now, Dachau was not all Jewish prisoners.
- A: No. They were in the minority. Dachau was the first concentration camp that was made. it was supposed to be a model for the rest of them. There was Jews in there, yes. But not like in Auschwitz or - what were some of those others?
- Q: Treblinka, Birkenau.
- A: Yes, that's right. Those were probably mainly all Jewish.
- Q: Those were extermination camps.
- A: But this looked like an extermination camp, too. (Laughs) It's really something.
- Q: So then, after you were discharged, you went back to Iowa.
- A: I went back to Des Moines and started working. When I came back I thought, "I'm gonna take three months off and just horse around and have a good time." So I went back home to Fort Dodge. My mother and father were by themselves, my sister was gone, and I was there about three days, and I thought, "This isn't going to go." So I called down to Des Moines, and of course that's where my girl was - she's now my wife - and I called her and I said, "I can't take this much longer, so I think I'll call down there and see if I can go to work." So I called down and told the boss, and he says, "Yeah, if you wanna come ahead, we'd be glad to have you come back." So I came back, and I didn't spend much time at home.
- Q: When did you move up here to Willmar?
- A: 1950.
- Q: What brought you here?
- A: Well, I was a research station manager, and I was trained at Des Moines. They have a big research spot there. When I joined Pioneer, they were just kind of getting going. It was established by Henry Wallace; it was his plant. So when I came back from the war, they had a station in Pozyville, Indiana, and they needed somebody to go there. The guy that was there left and moved out and so I took it. We moved down to Pozyville and I didn't like Pozyville, it was such a

little dinky town so I moved down to Princeton, Indiana, which is way down right along the Ohio River, just across from Kentucky. So I was there for two years. And then they'd opened this station at Olivia; they had a research station there, and the fellow they had there, he didn't like it, he said he was used to giving orders, and he couldn't take orders from headquarters, so he quit and they wanted to know if I was willing to come back and I says, "I sure would," because I didn't like the climate down in southern Indiana. So we moved up to Olivia, and just like in Indiana, Olivia was too small and kinky, so I moved up here to Willmar, in 1950, and it's been here ever since. That's where I finished off. For a good many years I carried this book around and never mentioned it to anybody. But Bill Borth got me interested in it, and I thought he was doing a fine job. You know, if it wasn't for Bill Borth, the town of Willmar by this time would've never even thought about the Holocaust, and wouldn't know what it was probably. Some of these kids would know, he's keeping it going. A lot of these young people are leaving this town and know all about the Holocaust.

Q: Is there a significant German population in the Willmar area?

A: It's mostly Scandinavian, but of course you know the state of Minnesota is more German than it is Scandinavian. There are German people here.

Q: Have any of them said anything about this?

A: Well, Kamboldt, I think that's German, they're friends of ours. But actually, you can't blame the German people of today, because they had nothing to do with it, and they think it's terrible. After I retired, my wife and I took a tour of Germany and Austria and so on, and when we came into Munich, why the first thing when we were taking the city tour - we had a German woman taking the tour of Munich - and so when the tour was ending and she was standing outside the door and we trooped off, I walked up to her and said, "I would like to go out to Dachau, where the concentration camp was. I was out there during the war, and I'd kind of like to see what it looks like." She says, "Nothing out there. You're wasting your time by going out there. All there is is a little plaque that says something about it. It's all gone." So I thought, "Okay." So we went back home and we were visiting my son and his wife in Edina, and his wife's sister was over in Germany - she's a nurse, she was in Arabia for six months, and she was over in Germany for six months - and I don't know how the subject came up. We were sitting around the kitchen table and I says, "When I was in Germany I kind of would have liked to have seen Dachau but they tell me there's nothing there." She says, "What do you mean there's nothing there?" She says, "I was out there. They've got the barracks. In fact, there's a museum out there, the whole thing." Here are some of the pictures.

Q: She gave you the pictures she had taken at the museum and a whole booklet about the memorial site, the concentration camp of Dachau.

- A: It tells all about it there. Have you seen that?
- Q: No, I haven't.
- A: You can have that if you can use it.
- Q: Thank you very much. It explains what's in the museum.
- A: You can make a copy and send it back.
- Q: I'll make a copy and give it back. And there's the gate, where in German it says, "Arbeit mach frei" - "Work makes you free." So you didn't get to see it.
- A: I didn't get to see it. Here's the Stars and Stripes. There's the division I was with.
- Q: You were with the 45th Division, 511 days of fighting. I've heard other people say it, too. By the time you had fought through that much of the war, the impact of the concentration camps was not as great as it was for some civilian coming in new because you'd seen so many people get killed.
- A: I have the regimental history book, too, that they printed up, and I bought.
- Q: Does your regiment have a reunion?
- A: The 45th Division has a reunion every year in Oklahoma, but I've never gone. One of my friends in South Carolina was the president of it, and he keeps yakking at me. I've seen him once since the war, and that was seven or eight years ago. It's always at a bad time. It's in August and that's when I'm busy out here in the cornfield.
- Q: Are you working still? Or is this a hobby now?
- A: Yeah. I was in Florida working in their winter nursery. The reason they do that is it takes so many generations of inbreeding on this corn before you can get the lines to cross to make the hybrids. So by growing a crop here and then harvesting it early and taking it down to Florida and planting it and doing the work there, pick it and bring it back here, you get two of those generations in one year, and so that speeds the process up. So about every other year I'd get to go down there, when I was working as a station manager, and spend three weeks down there. You get paid, and your expenses are taken care of, and after you're through you have a few days to do what you want to do. Now they're having a little problem; there's so many of them around, the computer's in and everything, there sits an administrative manager, so a lot of them don't feel as though they've got the time to go down there. They send the corn down there but they

have other people work on it. That's one reason why I'm retired, but still, I've been going down there every year since I retired.

Q: Before I ask you another question about corn, I should ask you the last question I always ask. What did I forget to ask you? Is there anything else you would think about, something you saw, something you thought a out, some feeling you've had, some people you've met? Connected with this whole idea of the Holocaust and Dachau and people treating fellow human beings this way? Or just anything, just the smell, or some sights you saw there.

A: Well, what got to me was when I was watching them take those bodies out and the guy had to use an ice tong to pick 'em up because they were so badly decomposed. It really is ugly to see the person must have suffered a lot; I mean, there was nothing but bones and skin on most of them there. It's a different sort of death than what you see in general life.

Q: Or even on the battlefield. Very different.

A: The 45th Division, they were sent overseas and their first action was in Sicily. They were in the Salerno and Italian rout, which was a real battle there at Salerno. They thought they were going to be run off. And I joined the 45th when they were right around Naples.

Q: So the 45th was basically, originally the Oklahoma National Guard and you were part of the replacement troops.

A: Sure. The replacements come in and when they wound up - they were mostly from Oklahoma when they started - when they ended, there were very few Oklahomans in it left. They'd either been sent someplace else, to be with another outfit or something.

Q: Or they'd been wounded or killed.

A: Yeah. So it was entirely different. It was made up from every place. There was quite a few from Massachusetts, and a few from Iowa.

Q: The reason I asked is because the Oklahoma Historical Society is doing an oral history project with survivors of the 45th Division who were liberators of Dachau concentration camp. I have talked several times to Joe Todd who is working on that, and it's a very small world.

A: Is that right? Yes, it is.

Q: You were telling me about 1939. You went down to Argentina. And you worked with some hybrid corn crops.

- A: Yeah, growing a winter crop of corn there, and this Graf Spee incident I was telling you about, those sailors were all interned in Buenos Aires, and they hung out in the Maxim Cafe, and I'd go in there, when I went into Buenos Aires. I'd go there for dinner, and it was a big restaurant with a lot of tables and they'd be sitting there and a couple of sailors would come in and it was "Heil Hitler," and then they'd sit down at the table with their friends, you know, "Heil Hitler," "Heil Hitler," all around. So I saw them a lot during that period. It was just the past and I just went on and never gave it a thought, until I got started here in the last few years. Well, like that German guide I told you about who said there was nothing at Dachau. But they've really had enough of it and they get sick and tired. This gal, I'm sure she was maybe three years old or maybe she hadn't been born yet, when this all happened. So it's kind of hard for them to take.
- Q: Have you read any books about the Holocaust or seen any films about it?
- A: I read a couple of books down here at the library. Bill (Borth) got me interested in it. They have some good books.
- Q: You can't remember titles or anything like that?
- A: No, I just looked under Dachau in the card index.
- Q: Oh, they have them catalogued that way.
- A: And they were all in one section of the library. The war, and they got 'em on other concentration camps, too, I'm sure. It's a little section over there, and I just looked under "Dachau" and "concentration camps."
- Q: That is unique, I think, among small communities, to have a teacher and a library that's interested. Are there any other people around the Willmar area that you know of, besides you and Don Dean...?
- A: No, there isn't. If I knew any I'd sic 'em onto Bill Borth because I know he wants to get ahold of them. Not too many people were lucky enough, or I won't say lucky enough, but fortunate enough, to have a camera when they were in there. Everything just broke right for me. I'll show you that weird camera. it's kind of old, a beat up thing.