Interview with Mr. Leonard Parker
By Rhoda G. Lewin
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is Rhoda Lewin interviewing Leonard Parker on March 20, 1987, for the Holocaust Oral History project of the Jewish Community Relations Council Anti-Defamation League of Minnesota and the Dakotas

A: I wasn't even going to come in today because I'm fighting a cold. I think I was 18 or 19, and I was going to school at the University of Wisconsin, and I enlisted in the army for no good reason except I thought it would be an adventure.

Q: What year was that?

A: It was 1943 and I was assigned to basic training and then was assigned to the Air Force and then they came out with an Army Specialized Training Program and I applied for it and was accepted and got stationed here in Minneapolis and lived at Sanford Hall, as a matter of fact.

Q: On the university campus.

A: Yeah. Someone told me that civil engineering and architecture had parallel programs the first two years, which isn't true, and so when I was in Wisconsin they didn't have an architectural program, and that's what I was doing. In any event, it was an accelerated program, and in nine months, shortly before we were to graduate, they folded the program and sent us off to infantry camp and I was assigned to Camp Phillips, Kansas, to an infantry group, the 44th infantry division. They had just been coming off maneuvers in Louisiana. In any event, we shipped overseas and I was fourteen months in combat.

Q: You went in in Normandy.

A: No, southern France. The Normandy invasion was prior to that.

Q: But you weren't down in Italy.

A: No, we were in southern France and it was a very uneventful invasion, actually. It got much tougher later. I was with a rifle company, came in as a PFC and ended up as a tech sergeant in charge of a platoon. In any event, we came in in southern France and fought through the Vosges Mountains and the Siegfried Line and the Rhine crossing, and by the time we got to Nuremburg, there were just isolated

problems, in terms of combat. And on this one morning, we didn't even know there was such a place as Dachau, but my platoon was on the point, and we hadn't had any serious fighting for three, four days -- it was skirmishes, but nothing serious -- and we came upon this little town. There was a sign that said "Dachau" -- it's not too far from Munich -- and as we were approaching the town, there was a terrible odor that was emanating from the town. We had tank support with us and we came into the town and people were standing around with bicycles. They were looting the stores and so on, and no one seemed to even be paying attention that we were coming through.

Q: These were Germans.

A: Yeah, the German civilians who lived there. There was no evidence of soldiers, or anything. We got to the far side of town, and as we approached, we saw these walls. And then we didn't know what to expect. Our commanding officer stopped us.

Q: What kind of walls?

A: Stone walls with piers, and then in places there was barbed wire, and metal fences and so on.

Q: But you couldn't see through it.

A: You could see in the distance, you could see there were buildings, in the open areas where the wire was. And we stopped 'cause we didn't know what to expect, and the commanding officer sent me, with one squad of my people, to see what was going on. And so we approached the camp and then we saw some people dressed in prisoner clothes with prisoner caps and so on, very timidly, sort of, coming towards us. I didn't tell you what the odor was. As we went through town, there was a railroad siding and there were flat cars, maybe twenty, thirty flat cars, just loaded with bodies. It turned out later that the Germans three days before had left. These bodies were on a side track where they were going to move them from one location to the gas chambers, and that's what the odor was, because they had been laying out there in the sun for three days, and had deteriorated. And we took pictures of that. And Betty couldn't stand to have them. I kept those pictures for a long time. I wish I had 'em. She burned them, she didn't want them. Do you believe it?

Q: That was your wife.

A: Yeah. One of the guys had taken pictures and I got copies of them. It wasn't very good quality but it was enough that you could see. (Shows pictures.) In any event, when they saw that we were Americans, one of the guys ran back, and the other one was talking to me in Yiddish. He didn't know I was Jewish and when I started answering him in Yiddish he just went crazy and he yelled to the other

guys and they were like this -- (demonstrates with pencil) -- just sticks. There were seven of us, and we were just surrounded by these people who were chattering, and so on -- one of my favorite songs is "Yiddishe Mama" -- and we spent about an hour talking to them and listening, and they couldn't believe that a Jew was an officer -- they thought I was an officer -- in the American Army. In any event, this was for about an hour, what we did was sort of talk and entertain each other, the seven of us. And I left them there and went back and reported what it was. I asked them, "Are there any soldiers?" No, there was nobody around, they said. The Germans had left three days ago, and they thought it was a trick and they weren't going to leave. They were mostly Jews, and there were some Poles, and some Russians, but most of the people that came out to us were Jews. So then, I went back and reported what was going on to our battalion commander, and then he phoned in to the general, but then we put together a contingent of seven people who went through with the regimental commander from our regiment. And I saw the furnaces. You wouldn't believe what went on in that place. And we went through barracks, with people who were too sick and too weak to get up. They were just laying there, you know, like dying. Incredible filth. That same evening, then, the Red Cross came in, and they wouldn't allow anybody else in. We went back into town and billeted for the night. There's a lot more in terms of detail that I just can't recall. And a lot of this is recorded in this letter I wrote. I felt so upset. Incidentally, they found a whole contingent of medical people who had been conducting experiments there, who thought because they were medical, they didn't have to run. That's a big place, Dachau. It's a big camp. And they found them there -- they had been hiding -- and questioned them. I wasn't involved in any of that, but we got word later. I had my squad billeted in a house in the city of Dachau. And the lady who owns the house, "Didn't you know this was going on?" -- we could speak a little bit of German -- "Oh no." "How could you not know?" The insistence that they didn't know what was going on! They suspected something, but they didn't know what was going on! Which was a lie. I think they knew what was going on. Whether they approved or not, they felt helpless to do something about it, or didn't want to do anything about it.

Q: Can you go back and try to describe a little more about how these people looked? How weak, how strong?

A: Without exception, they were skeletons. There was a young man, he was maybe 14 years old, who attached himself to us, a young guy. And he stayed with us. He stayed with our group all the way to Munich, and then I lost track of him. But all of them were emaciated. It was just terrible.

Q: This 14-year-old. Did he tell you anything about himself? When you talked, what did he talk about?

A: Of his whole family, he was the only one surviving. His mother and father, four brothers and one sister all had been gassed. He was the only survivor. He had

lived -- this was the sixth year that they had been taken, so he first got into this situation when he was 6, 7, 8 years old. Here again, I hadn't thought or talked about this in so long….

Q: And you said, it was a very big place. You're an architect. Can you remember what it was like physically? Can you describe it?

A: It was a permanent installation. It was like one of our military camps here. The buildings were solidly built. Now outside of this -- evidently they got overcrowded --they built a billet that was surrounded by two layers of fence and barbed wire and in there all they had was just barracks and guard houses stationed around it, and before we came to the main camp, we came upon this and we didn't go in. We bypassed it, but it turns out the extraordinarily weak and sick ones ended up just being put there, evidently to die.

Q: These were some wooden buildings, then, and some brick and stone buildings?

A: This looked like a permanent installation that they had put up. Brick and stone, and the guard houses around. And a hospital. It was a complete set-up, within the lager. It was like a military camp. And paved streets.

Q: Paved streets?

A: Yeah, in parts of it. Evidently, as they started doing more and more work in there, they had to expand more and more, and it began to look more and more temporary. But what looked to me like the permanent part of the camp was very solidly built.

Q: And you didn't go inside any of the other buildings?

A: We went through the hospital set-up. We went through where they gassed people, the furnaces and so on. We saw that. As a matter of fact, I had pictures of that.

Q: Can you remember enough to describe it?

A: What can you remember, you don't remember enough. It's like a furnace room. Except huge, I mean big.

Q: And there were people there who had worked in there?

A: No, when we went through, it was unattended.

Q: Now, a number of people have said that they read about the liberation of some of the labor camps in Stars & Stripes. And so they had some idea of what they were coming to.

A: I had no idea. As a matter of fact, I remember writing in this letter. Being in the infantry is really bad. You only fight about ten or fifteen percent of the time, but the living conditions are so bad. You live in holes in the ground, you don't get enough to eat, you're always afraid. So, it's really terrible. And there were often times at night, I'd be standing guard in a foxhole, and I'd say, " What the hell am I doing here, I'm fighting this whole war by myself!" and I couldn't understand why this whole thing was necessary. And I remember writing in this letter that it was necessary, and I felt for the first time, after the Dachau thing, that whatever I went through was absolutely useful and necessary, that this war had a purpose. It wasn't just a stupid kind of thing. It had a purpose.

Q: Now, when you have thought about it since then, do you have the feeling that it really made any change in you, in your outlook on life, people?

A: That's hard to measure. You know, I had a real nice Jewish upbringing.

Q: Where was this, incidentally?

A: In Milwaukee.

Q: So you were born in Milwaukee.

A: No, I was born in Poland. My parents were immigrating from Odessa, Russia to the United States and I was born en route. So I came here when I was two months old. I was born in a barn. Some nice Polish farmers let my mother and father and grandmother -- I had an older brother, two years old, at that time -- so that's where I was born, but I grew up in Milwaukee, and until I went into the service, that's where we lived. It's hard to measure that, and I've never consciously thought about what kind of effect it did have on me. But I'm sure it had some.

Q: If nothing else it made you grateful that your parents left Russia and came to the United States.

A: I really didn't think of that. But now that you mention it, that's probably right.

Q: When did you come to Minnesota then?

A: When I came into the Army Specialized Training I went to the University. I ended up going to school here because there was a young man whose home was in North Branch MN, named John Larson, and he and I became very close friends when we were both attending Army Specialized Training here, and when they folded the program we both were assigned to this infantry company, and we ended up bunking together, and then when we went overseas, we ended up being foxhole buddies. John was a tall, good-looking, all-state basketball player. A really neat guy. And we were both on the boxing team. And before we went into combat he asked me if I would go see his mother if anything happened to him. I

said I would if he would go see mine. He said he would. On December 15, I think it was '44, we had been working on a task force with tanks through the Vosges mountains, and hadn't hit any resistance the whole day, and when it started getting dark, we stopped to set up a perimeter on the down slope of a hill, in a heavy pine forest. And it had been raining. This was in December, that's their wet season, I think. And the ground was real wet, so when we dug a hole we couldn't go very deep, because we hit water. And you gotta stand guard -- one man asleep, one man guard -- but because we hadn't hit anything, we made arrangements at the next hole, the four of us, so we'd get three hours sleep, and one hour guard. So this was between ten and eleven at night. John and I were both in our hole, because the other hole was guarding, and I was lying on my back in his stomach, you know, getting some sleep, when the Germans started to shell the hill. A tree-burst hit, touch-sensitive shells, one of them hit the tree above and showered down on us, and it ripped his whole stomach up, tore the back of my jacket and tore his whole stomach open. And it was a dark, sort of drizzly night, and myself and another guy -- Minor, I remember his name, the other guy -- we helped John down to battalion aid through the shelling and everything, because he wanted to get out of there. He said, " I've got a million dollar wound, and I'm going. Come on, help me." So we got him down, and I left him there and he died on Christmas Day, December 25. So after the war, when I came home, I went to see his mother. I took a train to Minneapolis, and then a bus to North Branch, and I spent three days with his mother and his brother, and then when I came back here I thought I'd look up some of my army buddies who had been in school here -- a guy named Amos Sanford, who was from Alabama -- and we went out drinking. We used to have a lot of fun; we were here for that nine months and it was just an incredible time. I had already enrolled at the University of Illinois Architecture School, and he said, "What are you going to school there for?" He said, " Hey, little buddy, let's come here, and we'll have good old times like we used to have," and I said, " Well I didn't even know they had a School of Architecture." He was in engineering. He said they had a good school of architecture. So the next morning I went down and registered to go to school here. And then I met Betty, that was here, and we married, and except for the times I spent working and going to school away, this is where I've been. And that's that story.

Q: The last question I usually ask people when I'm interviewing them is what did I forget to ask you?

A: You know I have an overview of this whole thing and the horror of it struck me. As a matter of fact, there's an incident that I don't even like to talk about. The following day, when we had to go through the town to make sure that it was cleared, we came across -- it was like a castle on the edge of town, it was a big house, not a castle, but a palace, like -- and as we approached, we started to get some gunfire from it. So right away we stopped and we called up more. It turns out, to make a long story short, that there were somewhere between forty and fifty SS troops that had holed up there. They were left at the end to sort of clean things

up, and then when they saw we were approaching, they went to hide. And evidently figured out they didn't have much chance anyhow, and they might as well fight. Well after a short skirmish, they gave up, and our people were so infuriated by this whole thing, I was maybe the only Jew in our outfit, but everybody was so infuriated by what they saw that they were abusing civilians, and whomever. Well when my platoon got to these guys, they butted them with rifles and I stood by and watched. I was angry too, until they brought them back and they were prisoners, and they got interrogated, and we had nothing more to do with them.

Q: Who did the interrogating? What did you do with them?

A: We'd take people back to battalion, and they'd have the intelligence arm. We'd take them back there and I never had anything to do with that, but once we turned people over, I assume that in some cases the interrogation takes place at battalion level, and sometimes there at regimental, and sometimes it goes all the way, if it's important enough, so I don't know what happened. This happened a lot, incidentally, when we'd take prisoners. There was always this kind of interrogation to find out who was in front of them, so they'd try to get some intelligence about what to expect. In this case, it was more trying to find out about what went on in the concentration camps, and so on and so forth. But when we'd turn them over to battalions, prisoners, they'd take it from there, and I never was involved in that.

Q: And you said that these medical personnel who were captured -- you didn't actually have any contact with them.

A: No, we saw them. The Red Cross really took over. Once the camp was secured, the Red Cross took over. They were concerned about disease, and a whole bunch of issues, and we were barred from it after the first day. We couldn't get close to it anymore.

Q: When you first contacted prisoners, were you giving them your food, or did you have anything with you to give them?

A: Well, we had cigarettes and just our normal mess. We didn't come prepared to give them anything.

Q: K-rations?

A: K-Rations and some C-Rations All the people in our platoon were giving them whatever they had. I think back, and there must have been forty or fifty of them and they're all surrounding me with their terrible odors, and they just can't believe that finally they might be free, and doing, whatever, and they're all talking at once and asking questions at once, and they're just amazed that we can carry on a conversation in Yiddish, and then they all quiet down; I start to sing for them

"My Yiddishe Mama," and they're all crying. And I'm crying. And that image stays in my mind. And the other part is, the horror of seeing the furnaces. For some reason, that was worse than anything else, because there were still pieces and things and ash. And they had been very careful to clean them, incidentally, before they left, or at least that's the way it appeared to me. The image of the furnace in my mind is important. And then there were a whole range of other things that I may have in this letter referred to, which sort of all blur together. It's these few dramatic images that stay with me, and all the other stuff is vague. It really is.

I cannot, I cannot understand how -- this was a whole army of people that were involved in this -- how they persuaded themselves that what they were doing was somehow right or useful or, how they could live with themselves to do something like that. It's just incredible. I mean, if you treated animals that way, a herd of animals, I think most feeling people would have some compunction about what they were doing, and challenge it, and refuse at some point. And here they were taking human beings, and treating them like a hill of ants. The horror of that, I still can't get over it. It's the one thing that I can't understand, how people could do something like that, how so many people -- you know you see some crazies -- but how so many seemingly normal people could justify that whole act, I don't know.

Q: Another thing I thought to ask: these SS men who were holed up in this building outside of town that you captured, were these young soldier types? Were these older people?

A: Most of them were young. There were a few that I would guess maybe were in their thirties. But most of them were young people. They were indoctrinated -- I don't know. And their assignment was the Dachau camp. That was their assignment. They were not combat.

Q: And they were probably grateful they didn't have to be out in front, in combat.

A: Yeah. They were not combat troops. They were assigned to monitoring, and guarding, and doing whatever the hell they were doing.

(See copy of letter, attached.)