Interview with Glenn A. Stranberg
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: Today is January 26, 1987 and I'm interviewing Glenn Stranberg at his home in Atwater, Minnesota. Glenn, I know you were with a medic unit and were among the first people into Dachau concentration camp, but first let's back up and could you tell me where you were born, when, where you grew up and how you got into the U.S. Army?

A: It's quite easy to say where I was born. I was born on the farm where we live now, just down the road a half a mile from the house we live in at this time 69 years ago. I was born on the 10th of October, 1917; was drafted into the United States Army. Went in with the idea that being a farm boy, a hunter, and a trapper, figured naturally to be an infantry man. But the Army has the idea that if you know something you better get into something you don't know anything about, so they put me into the medics.

Q: You were drafted -- you had graduated from high school

A: I did not graduate high school, ma'am. I went to eighth grade. At that time, back on the farm, when you got through eighth grade you could quit going to school, and if you were needed on the farm, that's where you stayed. The next year, year after that, things changed and the rest of the fellows in our school started going into high school. But at that time, not too many went to high school in this part of the country. So I stayed on the farm, worked in the area, and as a part of that not going to school, I was drafted into the service, July of 1942, and I was in until December 21 of 1945. Just about three and a half years. I spent the first, after basic training, went to the Aleutian Islands, and spent one winter up there. There was a woman behind every tree but there wasn't a tree on the island! Figure that one out. (Laughter) But anyway it was an experience. We lived in tents, came back from there and they said I would not be going overseas any more, so my long-time girlfriend and I got married, and in six months I was on my way to Europe. I had some extra training, went over with an evacuation hospital. Had training in Atlanta, Georgia, and came out with a rating of T-4, which is sergeant, and trained as a surgical technician. It was a wonderful experience being in the medics, if you must have that type of experience.

Q: How much training did you have?

A: Before we went to the Aleutians we had some training in surgical technician. Then when we came back we had another month or two of training, and that qualified me to work in the operating room as a scrub nurse or assistant, and after being over in Europe a while, working in charge of a ward, I was transferred to the operating room, and worked for six months in the operating room. This time I worked with a doctor from Minneapolis. We had a team. A doctor, a nurse, and a technician worked together twelve hours a day, seven days a week. If you worked days you worked twelve hours, and then you'd shift around, so you could split a shift and work six, and then back on twelve. You worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The doctors, the nurses, the enlisted men, all worked the same.

Q: Where were you stationed?

A: We were stationed in Cherbourg, France, during that time.

Q: You went in on D-Day?

A: No, we went in after D-Day. We went in, through Marseille and caught up to them in France. Behind the first line, we were the first unit that took care of patients as they came off the line. What is now called the MASH unit replaced the First Evac hospitals. The only ones between us and the fighting was the aid stations, so they came back to us with just a bandage over their clothes and everything, and we cleaned them, and got them ready to be transferred back. A sidelight of that, I think, it's very interesting, of all the ones I took care of, I have only had association with one in all those years. A fellow that I met there, took care of him, when I was still working on the war. They took his foot off; he'd been in a tank.

Q: And this is somebody you've seen since the war?

A: Since then, we hunted and fished together about every year since we got out of the service.

Q: You mean he lived in this area?

A: He lives in Minneapolis. He is quite well known in Minneapolis. But we've enjoyed the family, we've been to all their weddings, all of those things. Herman Ratelle, he's an attorney, and he's brother to Alex, the runner. And we see Herman, we hunt together every year, have all this time. He is now at the head of a bunch of attorneys, fifty-some. He's come a long ways.

But other than that I have never had association with any of the people I took care of. And actually, when you got to the operating room there was no chance of visiting with them, because you just saw them, and they were gone. But the advantage of being in the operating room, if you ever did get so it was caught up,

so there wasn't a bunch laying in the hall, you could rest, where on the ward you worked twelve hours, and you worked the full twelve hours, 'cause you always had a ward-full.

Q: When your unit came to Dachau, had you known ahead of time where you were going, and what it might be like? Did you read about it, say, in the Stars and Stripes?

A: We had no idea, no idea 'til we walked down along the railroad track, and saw all the cars, the boxcars with the bodies in, and the people laying dead along the track. By the way, they weren't all dead along the track. Some were still alive, but they were unable to move anymore. You'd see them twitch.

Q: This was something you were assigned, your medic unit?

A: Our medic unit was set up to go in there and set up a hospital. An evacuation hospital is a 450-bed hospital normally. That's what you are to take care of. We moved in there, and we had 1500 patients. First thing we did when we got to Dachau, we tore the insides out of all the barracks that these SS troops had lived in, and set up our hospital units in there. I should go back and say that a unit consisted of 40 doctors and 40 nurses and 216 enlisted men. And we were a mobile unit, semi-mobile, so that one unit would move and set up, the trucks would go back and get the next unit and bring that back up, go back and get the third unit. As it moved so fast, we were sometimes spread out for many miles, but being in the surgical init, I was on the first unit each time, the same as when we moved into Dachau. I was in the first unit. This friend of mine worked on the ward yet, and he came in a day later, because of that.

Q: How many hours--I don't think it was days--was this after the first troops had come in?

A: We were one day behind them, and he was two days behind, his was on the second. We were there on the first, and the pictures that I took were taken on the first. At one time, shortly after we got to Dachau, I had an infection in my hand, and was hospitalized myself there. But after I got out of that I was transferred to the typhus ward, the ward where they had been working with this disease, and worked there for some time, where we were very restricted, naturally, because of the danger of infection coming out. As we came in to them, they had been eating brown, dark, hard bread, and of course we were going to be good to them, so we fed them, and you can't imagine the mess that we got out of that. Because they got diarrhea, all 1500 of them, right now.

Q: What were you feeding them?

A: We fed them regular rations, the first day. Potatoes and meat (laughs). We had a kitchen unit that did our cooking. And they just absolutely couldn't tolerate that.

Q: Potatoes and meat and vegetables and desserts?

A: Yeah. They weren't used to any of that. Their bodies weren't set up to use that.

Q: So then what did you do?

A: Well, the doctors had to find out what they would tolerate, more or less dry foods. Instead of all the stuff we were giving them. A normal thing on a ward, in the morning, you'd take out the ones who'd died in the night, you'd maybe have 10, maybe 20 at first.

Q: Out of how many people?

A: In each ward would maybe be about 60. So you'd have quite a death rate there at first. They were so weak, as you can see in the pictures. You can see the bones, their ribs sticking through all the time.

Q: Could you back up a minute and just try to remember, and walk me through the camp? When you walked through the gate, what did you see?

A: When we walked through the gate, there was that sign, " Work will make you free." You've maybe heard this before. And after we got into that camp. I didn't get to see a lot, for some time, because our job right away was to get set up. We had to get the hospital unit set up.

Q: This was your equipment and everything.

A: Yeah. And clean out the barracks, because they were small rooms in these buildings. They were big long buildings but they were small rooms and we tore all the insides out of them to make place for the beds. And after that, when I got time, I visited the crematory, that had four ovens, and then I was there at the time when these people showed how it was done. They reenacted it for Life.

Q: Could you describe that?

A: These fellows volunteered to come in there and show how they handled the bodies. They handled them with ice tongs. One would take hold by their head and one by their feet, put them onto the slab and slide them into the crematory.

Q: Just like a big oven.

A: Yes. They were big ovens. When we were back in Germany, we stopped, and they had one of the ovens left there. The rest of the camp, there was hardly any of it left. It had been all torn down. Then there was a Jewish and Protestant and

Catholic memorials that we visited at that time, flowers on each one of them, fresh flowers at each place, each day.

The camp itself was quite large. The administrative buildings were big. Everybody wore the striped uniforms -- the inmates -- -and then the Jewish people wore the star so they could see them, where the others didn't.

Q: This was a yellow star on their clothing?

A: I don't remember what color it was but it was always on the uniform.

Q: You mean there were non-Jewish?

A: Oh, yes. Many, many that were non-Jewish. Polish people, German people. It has a rundown in there, actually, of the numbers. There was even six Americans in there, according to the report. They'd been in Europe, I suppose, and they'd been captured there at that time. And there were big warehouse type buildings that were just full of loot that had been taken from other countries. I didn't know the value of art or any of that kind of stuff, for these statues or stuff, but I imagine some of that was priceless. But of course you didn't pay any attention to that at the time. On the end they had a place there where they manufactured guns, and they had warehouses full of them right there. The thing you could see there was that the ones that were manufactured before 1940 were fully finished, but as it went on, the ones that were stamped 1943, 1944, were getting more crude, all the way 'til the end, they were just a weapon that you wouldn't dare to fire.

Q: These were at the factory in the prison?

A: Right there, where the prisoners worked.

Q: So you had to come in with a surgical unit, but once you were in there, you were doing--

A: I was the same as I was before I ever went into the surgical unit, because everybody turned into just plain in charge of a ward, or worked in a ward.

Q: Did you have any kind of medication? You of course came in with DDT.

A: We had all our supplies. We gave them a bath first. Everybody went through a shower. We didn't have anything to do with that, because we had all we could do to take care of the ones that were down. So the other units took care of that.

Q: What did you do about clothing?

A: They issued them clothing and blankets, for the ones that were in the hospital. The rest of them had just what they had. They run out of there with what they had. They were so glad to go that they didn't care if they had anything on or not.

Q: You mean some of the prisoners went right away?

A: Some of them started getting out of there pretty quick, yes. They tried to get them out as fast as they could. American soldiers tried to.

Q: Where were they going?

A: They headed towards home, any way they could go.

Q: The war was still on.

A: Yes, in parts of it it was. But it was winding down so fast. Actually, it ended the 7th of May, wasn't it? This was only seven days before that. But the last three weeks or a month you could look up, and during the day, you'd see planes, steady, always you'd see planes, going both ways. So you knew it wasn't going to be any length of time, because there was no way anyone could stand up under the bombardment they were getting at the last.

Q: Then a prisoner at Dachau who was well enough to leave, could simply say thank you for opening the door and--

A: Well, not really, but it happened that way, a lot of them just got out of there.

Q: They had no decent clothing, they had no money.

A: No, but the war was over for them.

Q: They just went.

A: A lot of them did, yes.

Q: So you took care of the ones who were too sick. You weren't involved, then, in cleaning up the camp.

A: No. We didn't have anything to do with more than just taking care of the prisoners that were that sick. We didn't have anything to do with the burial details, or anything of that. We did see when the German people came and hauled the bodies out that were laying there, though.

Q: That was one of the things I was going to ask you. You say the German people?

A: From Dachau. They'd come and haul them out. From the city of Dachau. They brought out wagons with horses on, loaded them up, and hauled them out.

Q: What did they do with them?

A: Put them in a mass grave. There's a big mound at Dachau that we visited, where most of those were taken.

Q: Did you speak German?

A: No.

Q: Did you find some prisoners who spoke some English?

A: No, not really. I'll tell you about what it amounted to, would be to get a bunch of sick sheep, and try to talk to them. That's about what it amounted to. You just tried to communicate by sign language what you could, and then of course to try to get them to know you were trying to help them in the first place, because they had the idea that they would be killed. It's hard to believe, but they did. They didn't know that we were going to save them. A lot of them, their minds were already deranged because of what they had been through. I remember one young fellow -- -he was really messed up, and we got him all cleaned up, got new pajamas on him, got him into bed, and he jumped up and jumped out through the window and killed himself. Just like that. You didn't think there was anything wrong with him and all of a sudden he just -- -zip -- -and out he went, killed himself.

Q; There were also what they have come since then to call "mussulmen," people who were so starved that their minds were really gone. Did you see them?

A: Yes, oh yes. Every day you saw those. Nothing you could do for them.

Q: You didn't use IV's to try to feed them?

A: Well, in the typhus ward we used them all the time. There they were treated. A lot of those were not starved to death, because they had those in there as an experiment. They were the stronger ones.

Q: What kind of an experiment?

A: There's documentation in there (points to book) of things they did, infecting them with one thing or another to see how they would be treated after that. And that's the same with this typhus ward. They'd infect some with mosquitoes and some were other than that, too, where they would actually take blood from one to the other to see how they'd react to this. This had been done, of course, before we got there.

Q: So they were deliberately creating typhus, so they could experiment with different treatments. How long were you in Dachau?

A: About a month. And then at that time they were getting us ready. At the time when the war ended with Japan, we were already loaded on box cars with our unit, for deportation to Japan. So we would have been in on the initial landing in Japan, had they gone that far. For three or four days we just sat in those cars; they didn't know what to do with us, where to send us, or anything. So we just stayed right in those cars. All our equipment was loaded, everything was already on the train, ready to go.

Q: And you would have found concentration camps there, too.

A: I imagine we would have found something, maybe not as bad, but you never know, because it seems that wherever there's war, there's hell.

Q: Can you remember what your thoughts were at this time?

A: Well, yes and no.

Q: But you've thought about it since then.

A: It still bothers me. I came home and people said they didn't believe it. They didn't think there was anything to it. Then I'd get upset. Very much so.

Q: You were trying to talk to people about this.

A: Yeah. And they didn't believe it. But it is hard to believe. People in the country now have heard of it so much, the Holocaust, they do believe it. But when you first came home, and they had never heard of it, it's hard for them to believe.

Q: Who were you trying to tell?

A: We had people that lived right in the area, neighbors, my brother-in-law -- -his dad came from Germany -- -and of course they didn't believe this, naturally. But that didn't bother me as much as with him because I knew what the deal was, but some of these others -- it kind of shakes you up.

Q: So then did you just stop talking about it?

A: No, I'd bring the pictures out. That's why they're worn. This is a picture of newsmen at Dachau that I took; the same one as this Life one here.

Q: So did you give up talking about this?

A: No, I haven't given up. I suppose that's how Bill Borth got ahold of me. I didn't give up.

Q; You've been on your Holocaust education project, then, for forty years.

A: Yeah, sort of. He was on the radio one day, and I called him and talked to him and asked him if he wanted some other pictures, and he came out right away. So you will find him a very interesting fellow, I can assure you of that.

Q: Did this make you a different person?

A: I suppose it did.

Q: In what way?

A: More compassionate, I suppose, to people. More a believer that anything can happen. I suppose I'd say that.

Q; You think it could happen again?

A; Yes, it could happen again, and it will happen again. Maybe not as bad, but it will happen again. I think it's nice that your people are doing this to get things out. This book has been at school here quite a few times; teachers have had it. I've had trouble keeping track of it, but I've got my name all over it.

Q: This is the book about Dachau that was put out by the US Army, with pictures and descriptions of what they found. The last question I always ask when I'm doing an interview is, " What did I forget to ask?" What would you like to say as you look back?

A: After all these years, it's hard to remember. But you've got to realize that we were pretty callous by the time we got to Dachau. We had taken care of patients for all those months. Sometimes you would go to work and twelve hours later you'd go off of work and still some of those same people in the hall hadn't got in. We had a unit that had seven operating tables and one leg, one cast, and still at times it would be twelve hours before they would get in. And then you could figure that when they came in, their arms and legs would be going because it'd been too long, but there was no way you could take care of more than so many. Even with seven tables going. If you got a backlog of a lot of people, they just don't get in that fast.

Q: When you came back, did you have any thoughts of perhaps, instead of farming, using your G.I. Bill to go to school?

A: I should have done that. I should have gone as a P.A., or something of that kind, but I was a farmer, ad all I wanted to do was get out, all the way out. But I

enjoyed the part of being in the operating room very much. I liked it. And I was good at it, if I say so myself. (Laughs) I did things that I'd have to go to school for a long time to even be allowed to do. But I can tell you, if you're going to stand there and hold those retractors for an hour, the shoulder blades stick right out the back.

Q: It's hard work, physical labor.

A: It's hard work and it's hard work being a doctor, I can assure you. And we had 40 doctors, and 39 of them were super. It's just that you get that one that just isn't so good, but I guess you find that in any profession. (Laughs) I don't even know where he was from.

Q: When you talked about the inmates at Dachau, you were always referring to men. Did you see any women?

A: Our hospital only took care of men. There was another evac hospital that was in there, and they took care of the women. But there were not a lot of women at Dachau. We only had men in ours.

Q: Why did you divide them up?

A; I suppose it's easier taking care of them and the association of back and forth was easier that way. So we just had men patients.

Q: Let me ask you what ages these people were. Were they teenagers, older people?

A; Some of them were young. Some of them had been there for many years, and if they'd been there for any length of time, they looked old, because they aged very quickly. An example of this was ten years ago when Kevin went to Poland with a singing group -- our youngest son -- and during that time (pauses crying) -- Kevin went with this singing group from the New York area. The fellow that started it was from the University of Minnesota Morris. He was the one that recruited these kids to go over there and sing in these churches. And during the time that they were there, they rode buses in the countries. In Poland he rode a bus, it happened that the driver spoke some English, and he told Kevin he had been at Dachau.

Mrs Stranberg: You remember. He said, "Thank your dad, and the American people."

Q: Oh, he had been a prisoner there, and he went back to Poland, and lived there?

A: He would have been in his twenties at the time.

Q: Was this a Jewish person?

A: Yes. He had been in the hospital, either ours or one of the others. I'm sure he was Polish and Jewish. But this is a sidelight of this singing trip. I didn't know the difference of Jewish people or anyone else. We were Lutherans, had been all our lives, never had any association with Jewish people, and I didn't know nothing. That's hard for you to believe, possibly, but out here in the country, like we live here, in Atwater we have one Jewish man. He is married now, and has a wife and one child, and they've adopted a couple of Koreans.

Mrs. S: The interesting thing about that is when Glenn was in the service, I lived in a big house, and one of my best friends turned out to be a Jewish girl from Boston, and I really learned a lot from her.

A: It's surprising now that the difference of a person -- what you find out. I didn't go to high school, but I got a pretty good education in the service.

Q: I can tell.

Mrs.S: And the Birnbergs that had the Embers, you know? Our daughter worked for them when she was in high school. She'd go down there in the summer and take care of their children.

A: And of course she found out that the people from the city didn't know everything, either. They'd never seen anything grow! They'd never had a garden, had never seen even as much as a radish grow.

Mrs. S: We invited them to dinner one Sunday and they had never driven --

A: --this side of Minneapolis in a car.

Mrs.S: They'd always flown every place they'd been.

Q: So then you're saying we're all very provincial people.

A: Right. That's what I mean. You could come out here and you wouldn't be able to plow that field. I'd get down there and I wouldn't be able to do anything you folks do.

Mrs. S: That little Birnberg boy got on the tractor, and we just almost couldn't get him off there. He'd never seen anything like it.

A: One of the funniest things was we drove out here and Mr. Birnberg said, " What's those square things out there?" They're hay bales. " But what can you do with them and how did they get there?" That's how naïve other people can be too. Not just hick farmers. That's what I was getting at. We both got an education.

Q: And you'd never seen anybody Jewish before?

A: No, I never had. People are people, that's all I figure, all the time.