HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HERMAN HILLMAN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Arlene Shank
Date: February 18, 1987

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HH - Herman Hillman [interviewee]
AS - Arlene Shank [interviewer]
Date: February 19, 1987

Tape one, side one:

AS: Today is February 19, 1987, and I'm here in Florida with my father, Herman Hillman, whom I'd like to interview for the Gratz College Holocaust Archive. My father was one of the U.S. forces who liberated Dachau. Dad, would you like to tell us about your experiences?

HH: Yes. I'm happy to help with the Archives and I've had some familiarity with the Holocaust, from the point of view of a United States Army soldier. I was inducted into the United States Army in 1943 and assigned to the corps of military police. I was trained as an M.P. at Fort Custer in Michigan--basic, basic training--and our company, consisting of 135 men and three officers, were then sent to Brady, Texas, where there was a prisoner of war enclosure, housing Africa Corps prisoners that were captured in Africa, who refused to sign wavers stating that they would not try to escape, and consequently were kept incarcerated during the entire period of the war. These were hard-core Nazis who were inculcated by Hitler and Hitler's minions with an extreme hate for Jews and everything Jewish. And it was felt by the authorities that training and keeping them under guard would be helpful to us for our assigned tasks when we invaded Europe.

When we finished our training in Brady, Texas, we were returned to Fort Custer for advanced military police training and then we were sent overseas. We traveled on a converted luxury liner, the former USS *America*, which was renamed the SS *Wakefield*, a troop carrier that carried 6,000 troops. And it was a very fast ship and it required no escort and we made Europe, under blackout conditions of course, in six days, which was considered very fast in those days. We landed in Liverpool, England and were transferred, forwarded, to the Midlands, a place called Burry, in Lancashire. And there we were attached to the United States 1st Army headquarters and given our role in the army's scheme of things as prisoner of war Military Police. Assigned to us were a number of recent emigrés from Germany, men who came over in 1938 to 1939 to the United States, and they, of course, were impressed into the army and they found their way into the prisoner of war processing team--German-speaking personnel--and it was they who interrogated the prisoners right off the front lines when they were still very nervous and upset--just came off the firing line, as it were--and much tactical information was secured in that manner. Our forces knew at all times what German regiments and armies were facing us, due to this type of interrogation. [pause] It is difficult to explain exactly how a person of my persuasion, educated in the Jewish milieu in Chicago, would feel in having to treat the enemy--the enemy in thousands, hundreds of thousands as they were. But I had no difficulty reconciling myself to the treatment of those prisoners because they didn't

represent hateful characters. They were poor sad sack prisoners at the time, who were very happy to be out of the war as prisoners of the Americans, with no further fear of death and only an outlook of happiness in their future, not--[noise; tape off then on; pause] composed almost entirely by recent emigrés from Germany, and almost 100% Jewish.

Together with another MP, EG company, we leap-frogged our way across France, Belgium, and into Germany, always in the front, always in the front lines or just behind, and always concerned with German prisoners of war, which included of course many in civilian garb who were attempting to escape their prisoner of war status. Many Poles, many Russians, many Yugoslavs, many other nations and nationals from western Europe who were impressed into the German Army and were only too happy to be captured and sent to, back, to the advanced zone of communications and back from there to England, France and England, and then, ultimately to the United States for the duration of the war.

My main concern with Dachau came when we were on a routine jump into Germany and we approached the camp, not having any knowledge that it was Dachau. Our prior knowledge of concentration camps was mainly from *Stars and Stripes*, the magazine that was distributed to American soldiers--it really was a leaflet newspaper--which hinted at and talked about the existence of concentration camps in Germany and in Poland, where atrocities were being committed against mainly Jewish people; also Gypsies, homosexuals, all people who were considered non-Aryan and sub-German, sub-Aryan as it were.

When we came to Dachau, which was near Munich, we found the prisoners, at least the ones that were alive, in the camp, wandering around, dressed in their black and white uniforms, in a daze, most of them emaciated and near death; walking skeletons, I called them. The crematoria were still warm. There were bodies piled outside of the crematoria ready for incineration. All the guards, the German guards, had vacated the camp and ran away a day before as the camp was approached by the forerunners of the Americans, of the American troops, that is. I, and together with the other members of my company, assisted as much as we could in the guiding of the prisoners, the--not prisoners, they were prisoners of the Germans, they were members of Dachau, they were survivors, they were the survivors of the Holocaust--to the medics where they were given immediate first aid, to the mess halls where they were fed proper food for the first time for many of them in many, many months. And they finally, the whole entire camp was evacuated by U.S. troops, to hospitals and to places of rehabilitation. The dead were buried by the, so far as I know, by the quartermaster corps of the United States Army, who had a grave registration unit in Europe at all times. And in a very few days, the camp of Dachau was evacuated of survivors.

A few years later, on a visit to Europe, I went to Dachau to see what had transpired, and I found the place completely sanitized. Walkways, chapels had been built by the various denominations of Protestants and Catholics and Jews. A building housing a museum of Holocaust memorabilia, books that had been published since the war and so on. The barracks which we had entered and seen, which bore evidence of the savage

clawing of the poor inmates who were destined for the gas chambers and the crematoria, had been removed, and in their place sterile barracks had been erected. Several years later, on a subsequent visit to Dachau, this time in company with my wife, I found the place now completely sanitized, the barracks gone. Gravel paths and pathways filled with flowers and growing things and so on. But the smell, the smell of the burning flesh that we had experienced the first time and which we experienced the second time, was still present--even on the third visit, which was fifteen years or twenty years after the end of the war. I am very happy to be able to present what information I had, and a description of an eye-witness account of the liberation of Dachau for the Holocaust Museum, or the Holocaust Archive. Thank you.