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Louis P. Blatz oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 12, 2008

Louis P. Blatz (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: All right. Give me your full name and spell it for me.

Louis P. Blatz: No.

MH: Okay.

LB: N-o. (laughs)

MH: I thought you were going to spell "it" for me—i-t.

LB: I-t.

MH: Thank you. Louis, L-o-u-i-s, P. as in Paul, Blatz, B-l-a-t-z.

LB: How did you know it was Paul?

MH: Is it?

LB: Yes. (laughs)

MH: Oh, well, there we go. ...And your date of birth?

LB: When my mother had me.

MH: Yes.

LB: December 12—December 10, 1925.

MH: Which makes you how old today?

LB: I'll be eighty-three in December.

MH: You're a distinguished looking man with a long white beard.

LB: Well, I never had the beard; I started growing the beard when I retired.

MH: Where'd you retire from?

LB: Retail.

MH: Retail? Yeah.

LB: Forty-five years, two different companies: Frontal Department Store and Kings Way Department Store, in Detroit.

MH: Where'd you grow up? Where were you before the Army?

LB: Detroit.

MH: And did you enlist, or were you drafted?

LB: I was drafted, are you kiddin'? I screamed and yelled and hollered, but they took me anyway.

MH: They took you anyway. What year was that?

LB: Nineteen forty-four, July 14.

MH: So, you were—

LB: Two years.

MH: You were twenty years old?

LB: Nineteen—eighteen. Eighteen and a half.

MH: I'm math challenged.

LB: Well, I'm not very good at math either. Two and two and twenty-two.

MH: Yes, it is. So, where'd they send you for basic?

LB: Well, first of all I went to Great Lakes in Illinois. They closed, and then I went to Fort Wol—I mean, to Camp Wolters, Texas.

MH: Yeah?

LB: I was there for eighteen months.

MH: Okay. For eighteen months?

LB: I mean weeks. I'm not well at all, you know.

MH: That's okay. And when did you go overseas?

LB: The first of the year. I left—

(rustling sound)

MH: Don't do that. It's picking up on the microphone. Thank you.

LB: I left on the *Queen Mary*, the first of the year forty-five [January 1, 1945]. I joined the 80th [Infantry] Division in the middle of January.

MH: Where did the *Queen Mary* taken you? Le Havre?

LB: Yeah. Through Scotland, England, and then they threw us on a boat and we went over and landed. I don't even remember where we landed, but we had to walk in the water. And this is—the war was still going on. But from there I got on a truck and went to Luxembourg, where I joined the 80th Division.

MH: Okay. So, that's after the Battle of the Bulge.

LB: The Battle of the Bulge was goin' on when I joined them.

MH: It was going on when you joined them?

LB: Yeah. It was winding down when I joined 'em.

MH: Was that your first combat?

LB: Yeah. That was my first combat, yeah.

MH: How'd you deal with that?

LB: I was a kid; it didn't bother me.

MH: Really?

LB: It didn't bother me.

MH: Didn't think you could die?

LB: I never thought about dying. I've always had a feeling, all my life—even when I was a kid—you're gonna die, there's nothing you can do about it. Why worry about it and get sick? My doctor today always used to say "You've got a good philosophy. It's better to be patient than to become one."

MH: Okay. So, tell me, did you know anything about the Holocaust, about the death camps?

LB: I've heard about 'em.

MH: Before?

LB: Before, we were in training, they used to talk about it, in Camp Wolters. They used to tell us there were such things goin' on. They had no pictures or nothing, I mean, at that time. So, all you got was word of mouth, from instructors at the camp. But you knew it was happening.

MH: Okay, so now you get to—you're in the Army, you're in Europe, you're in Germany. Tell me how you get to Buchenwald. That's the only one you saw?

LB: No. Oh, no.

MH: What's the first one you saw?

LB: No, that was the first one. The second one was in Austria, Ebensee. In between Ebensee and Buchenwald, we—what's the word? I'm looking for the right word—there was prisoner of war camp, all British soldiers. We liberated—that's the word. We liberated that camp, and we kept right on moving.

MH: Let's talk about Buchenwald.

LB: Yeah.

MH: What was the day like? (rustling noise) Oh, you did it again.

LB: Yes, I did. Nervous energy.

MH: The lady who transcribes this is going to find you and slap your hand.

LB: Yeah, I used to get that in school all the time, with a ruler. (laughs)

MH: Kathy is very strict. She'll do it to you again.

So, what was your first sight of Buchenwald?

LB: It wasn't the sight, it was the smell. We were walking along the road, our company, and all of a sudden somebody said "Ooh, what's that odor?" and I said, "It sounds like Mount Clemens [Michigan]." You know what I mean, Mount Clemens? In the old days, Mount Clemens was noted for mineral baths, rotten eggs.

MH: Oh, okay. Sulfur dioxide.

LB: Sulfa gas—it has an unpleasant odor. And further along, we got along the line and we see the gates were wide open. We went in, and we see all these people standing there. Some of them had already been disrobed. Somebody had gotten there before us. They

were taking all their clothes away from them, spraying them down, washing them. And then they brought the townspeople from Vereem or something, I can't even pronounce—

MH: Not Weimar?

LB: Weimar, that's it. But they didn't call it—it started with a V. You know, German. Anyway, they brought them in. They were cleaning the barracks then, in other words, and that's when I took pictures.

MH: What did you see? Tell me—picture it in your head and describe it to me.

LB: Well, like I say, there were people standing behind this—it looked like barbed wire, but it wasn't barbed wire, a whole roll. Naked, of course. They were all standing like this 'cause fellas were taking pictures. And you went further along, and then you went into this one area that they showed the burning chambers.

MH: Crematorium.

LB: Crematoriums. I think I got a couple pictures of that, and then there was two or three other buildings. They had them laying in piles.

MH: Bodies.

LB: Bodies. Dead bodies. Then of course—we were only there for about an hour, an hour and a half, and then we moved on.

MH: Got orders to move on.

LB: Then we moved on. You know.

MH: Did you talk to any of the inmates?

LB: You weren't allowed to. They warned you not to feed them anything. They said, "Don't give them anything to eat."

MH: 'Cause it could kill them.

LB: Well, it could kill 'em, that's the words they used. Because they had no food; they were all skin and bones. They were—like I say, if I'd have brought those pictures, you'd understand what I'm saying.

MH: What's going through your head when you're seeing this?

LB: How could anybody be so inhumane as to treat people, fellow human beings, in that manner? And all that ran through my mind was these people had no conscience, they didn't care one way or another, and they didn't treat 'em as human beings. They treated them as animals. And you know, what can I say? It was just horrible. And it was a relief to us, and I'm sure it was to all the fellows that were in my company, when we left to get out of there, because it was hard to breathe: the odor, the smell, the air. The crematoriums, some of them still had bodies burning in 'em. So you could still smell it, and it was a relief on our part to get away from it. But you couldn't forget. You couldn't forget.

MH: Did it make you angry?

LB: Oh, I don't get angry easy.

MH: Yeah?

LB: I don't get angry easy. But if I do, look out. I can be mean.

MH: So were you in "look out" mode after that?

LB: Yeah, after that, you just say to yourself, "Nobody better tell me that this didn't happen." Now it was years later, mind you, when I was working, where a young fellow—I see two young fellows talking. This was in retail; I was in retail. Two fellows were talking, and they were arguing back and forth, back and forth. I walked by, and I heard him say, "That's all a lot of bull, that never happened." And then he says, "The Holocaust."

So, I stopped, and I walked over to him, and I said, “What was it you just said?” And he says, “Well, he’s trying to tell me that this Holocaust really happened over in Germany.” Now this was—I’m trying to think approximately the year. This was in the mid-fifties [1950s] when this young man made this statement. And the next day, I took these pictures in to work. And I walked over to him and I said, “Can I show you a couple of pictures that I took while I was in Germany in World War II?” He says, “What kind of pictures?” I says, “Well, they’re self-explanatory—you have to look at ’em, and you’ll know exactly what.”

He looked at them. And by the time he got through, tears were running down his face. He says, “You know, I didn’t believe it. Now I do. Nobody could convince me different.” I says, “Well, now you’re educated to the point. Now you can tell somebody else the same thing I just showed you. And if you have any doubts that these are true pictures, I have people that can back ‘em up.”

“No,” he says, “I believe you. Because I work with you, you know, you’re a nice person, I like you, and you wouldn’t lie to me.” I says, “I got no reason to lie.” Pictures don’t lie. “They can be doctored,” I says, “but these were not doctored.” You could see—this is the old film, you know. So he says, “Well, I sure appreciate you filling me in on this, ’cause I was really dumb. I didn’t think that happened. I thought it was all propoganda.” I says, “That’s why it happened, because people wouldn’t believe it was happening.” That’s our dear friend Adolf [Hitler].

MH: How many years ago was this, did this take place, do you think?

LB: This was on April 12, 1945.

MH: The confrontation with the—

LB: No, no; that was fifty-five [1955], fifty-six [1956] with this young boy. But it was liberated April 12, 1945. That’s the same day [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt died, because we got the notice when we were walking. After we got out, we were walking down the road and somebody come along with a Stars and Stripes and said, “President Roosevelt died.”

MH: How’d that hit you?

LB: That hit, too. Two things at one time—you think, “What’s going to happen now? Who’s gonna be the President?” It wasn’t until I got out of service when I found out that [Harry S] Truman, which I have all the respect in the world for, he was told nothing about the war. And he had to learn from scratch. And he was the one who instituted that, so when the President, when he was finally sworn in as President, that it would never happen again, that a Vice-President wouldn’t know what’s going on in the background.

MH: When you’re wandering around Buchenwald, how did they get word to you, “Okay, we’re pulling out”?

LB: Your company commander, who was leading us. Our company commander.

MH: So, you were in a group.

LB: We were in a group, a company. It was our company.

MH: So the company commander says, “Time to go.”

LB: Yeah. “Time to go, we have to go.” Well, he gets his orders, too. And we were there for maybe an hour, hour and a half, something like that. So, we weren’t there too long.

MH: So, you went back out the gate.

LB: Went back out the gate.

MH: Are there guards at the gate to keep the prisoners from going out?

LB: No, there was nobody at the gate. The gates were wide open.

MH: But the inmates weren’t wandering out?

LB: No. No, they were too weak. How do they walk?

MH: Well, I heard some of them got out and actually were sort of—

LB: Well, some of 'em—

MH: —and they were messing with Weimar.

LB: Well, I didn't hear that. That, I didn't hear. That, I didn't hear. All I know is that they were cleaning it up, trying to get clean clothing, the place clean to sleep. I got pictures of them in their bunk.

MH: You're back out on the road, and you're in trucks or you're walking?

LB: Walking. Yeah, we were walking.

MH: And you said you came to this other camp, Ebensee?

LB: Ebensee. Before we hit Ebensee in Austria, we liberated a British prisoner of war camp. We were there for about a half hour. The soldiers—everybody was hugging, all the Americans and the British. There were a few others, Americans and a few other French soldiers.

MH: Do you remember the name of that camp?

LB: No.

MH: Never mind. Okay.

LB: No, I really don't. It was just a quick—we were in and we were out.

MH: Had they been fed? Were they in bad shape?

LB: Well, some of them looked like they hadn't been; others, yes. You really couldn't tell, 'cause they still had their uniforms. They still had their uniforms on.

MH: So, now you keep going, and you get into Austria.

LB: Austria. That's where Ebensee—I didn't—I had no more film, so I didn't take any pictures.

MH: What did you see there?

LB: Same thing.

MH: It was as bad as Buchenwald?

LB: Just as bad. Just as bad, yeah. Just as bad. By that time, the camera that I found with the film in it, I had used all up in Buchenwald. So I couldn't take any more pictures.

MH: So, the camera's in your pack? When did you develop the film?

LB: The film wasn't—let's see. That was April, May—it was in June. We went into a small town, Bamberg. I remember the name. One of our fellows found a—what do you call it?

MH: Photo shop?

LB: A drug store, a photo shop, and he—that was his hobby at home. He found all this equipment and everything, and he developed all our film and we got extra film. A little—all it was was a little tiny box camera.

MH: German?

LB: German, yeah. It had—like I say, it had a roll of film in it.

LB: So what else do you remember about Ebensee?

MH: Oh, not a lot. We weren't there that long, either. We were there for not even—maybe an hour. Maybe an hour, and then we had to move on. We moved on and went to some lodge. I'm trying to think. It was a lodge, a ski lodge, and we spent the night there.

The next morning, we got orders to go up into the Alps to flush out the SS troops. And you know, none of us had any kind of clothing for warmth up in the mountains. We spent from late night until about two o'clock in the morning climbing in the mountains, slipping—climbing up and sliding back. We ended up in another lodge, and we spent the night at that lodge. And the next morning, we got out, and from there, we went to (inaudible), I remember that.

From there, that was probably—by that time, it was probably July, into July, somewhere at the end of July. And our company commander had come back. He had been on leave. He had just come on. Jim Young was our company commander. He had come back. He was back for about a month, August, and then he was shipped out. He was shipped home, he was discharged, and we got a new commander. From there, we were—our company, Division 2, my company; I'm speaking about my company—we ended up in Czechoslovakia. We were there until the 25th of November forty-five [1945], and the Division went home. But I was lacking points, so I was shipped out to the 102nd. I became an MP [Military Police], little old me.

MH: When you were in the Army, how tall were you?

LB: Five [feet] six [inches], five [feet] five [inches], something like that.

MH: And skinny.

LB: Skinny. A hundred and thirty-five pounds. All fat. (laughs)

MH: And you were a rifleman?

LB: A rifleman yes.

MH: M1?

LB: M1. That's a machine that you could take apart and put together with your eyes shut. You didn't need to see it, because it was just that well made. The guy that made that gun knew what he was doing. It very, very, very rarely ever jammed. And if it did, it's because you stuck the muzzle down in the dirt. That was something you were very careful not to do.

MH: Ever get M1 thumb?

LB: Oh, yeah. I still got it. Still got it.

MH: So when you came home, did you tell people about the camps?

LB: No. I never talked about the war.

MH: You never talked—

Unidentified Man: Join the crowd. Nobody did.

MH: You never talked about—

Unidentified Man: Nobody did.

MH: —about Buchenwald?

LB: No. I showed my parents—my dad mostly; my mother wouldn't look at 'em—and of course my brother, who was with me. And somebody else—oh, one of the store managers. He had been at the war, but he was in the Air Force. He said he had heard about concentration camps, but he says, of course, he didn't see 'em. I showed him, and he made copies for himself.

MH: What do your pictures show?

LB: They show—like I say, most of 'em show about—I had 200 pictures, but over the years it dwindles down to maybe twenty, twenty-five.

MH: How many of those are in the camp?

LB: I'd say about half of the pictures that I got. Yeah.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself over there?

LB: Overseas, yeah, but not at the camp.

MH: No, not at the camp. Okay. If it's possible, I'd like to borrow your pictures and copy them.

LB: I could send you a copy.

End of interview