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## Philip Drell and Winnie Drell oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 18, 2008

Philip Drell (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
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Interviewee: Philip Drell (WD) and Winnie Drell (WD)  
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)  
Interview date: June 18, 2008  
Interview location: Conducted by telephone  
Transcribed by: Kimberly Nordon  
Transcription date: March 8, 2010  
Audit Edit by: Michelle Joy  
Audit Edit date: April 1, 2010  
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
Final Edit date: April 13, 2010

[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:** Can you give me his name and spell it?

**Winnie Drell:** It's Philip with one L.

MH: Okay.

WD: And the last name is D-r-e-l-l.

MH: And the address?

WD: ...

MH: And the phone number is....

WD: Yes.

MH: And his date of birth is?

WD: March 19, 1919.

MH: Okay, all right.

WD: Okay, hold on a minute.

MH: Thank you.

WD: Okay, do you want to pick up the other phone in there?

**Philip Drell:** What's going on?

WD: He wants to talk to you. Do you want me to listen?

PD: Yeah.

WD: Okay, he's going to pick up another phone and I'm going to listen.

MH: Okay.

WD: His hearing is very bad, so if you could talk loud?

MH: Okay.

WD: That would be better.

MH: I can do that.

PD: Hello.

MH: Hi, how are you?

PD: Good, what's going on?

MH: Uh, I'm writing a book about the liberators of the concentration camps.

PD: Yes.

MH: And I understand you were at Dachau?

PD: You're right.

MH: And I'd just like to talk with you about your experience there.

PD: You know what, that was about six or seven—I'm tryin' to remember. Quite a long time ago.

MH: It's sixty-three years.

PD: Oh, that's good enough. (both laugh)

MH: April 29, 1945.

PD: Okay. So, what am I supposed to tell you?

MH: First of all, tell me what were you doing in the army? What was your job?

PD: What did—do what?

MH: What was your job in the army?

PD: Well, anything I wanted to do. I sort of had a (inaudible) thing to do and I did it. I, um, I don't know; for some reason or the other they let me do whatever I wanted.

WD: Phil, go back to who did you—who you were with, kind of an outfit were you in. I think that's what he wants to know.

MH: (murmurs in agreement)

PD: Well, I was—she's a little off on that. I was at a—I was with General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, and I practiced anything I wanted.

MH: Okay, so did you see camps besides Dachau?

PD: Did I what?

MH: Did you see concentration camps besides Dachau?

PD: Well, I saw concentration camps.

WD: He was at a slave labor camp that the Nazis burnt to the ground with all of the—

MH: The people inside?

WD: The prisoners inside.

MH: Do you remember the name of that camp?

PD: Oh, God, there was so many I couldn't tell you which one is which.

WD: You know what, I could look it up. I just don't—it started with a T.

MH: Thekla?

WD: Thekla. Yes.

MH: T-h-e-k-l-a?

WD: Yes, that's what it was.

MH: And do you remember anything about that occasion?

PD: One was like the other.

MH: Okay.

WD: He has pictures of it, Michael.

MH: Okay.

PD: Wait a minute, what—I'm not sure what I got.

WD: Yes, you've got picture of the prisoners who got out of the burning building and ran to the electrified wire and were killed.

PD: That was not it.

WD: That was Thekla.

PD: That was the, uh, that was the—that was with the people they had. I'm the—in the various—when the (inaudible) they were doing things. Then they were slaves, as a matter of fact.

WD: Yes.

MH: Right.

WD: Yeah, he has pictures of that.

PD: Well, not really. When I got there, they were all burnt to death. I've got corpses and things of that nature.

MH: How long after the American troops got there did you get there? Was it immediately, or was it a day later or several days later?

PD: Oh, I have no way of knowing. We got there pretty early, I'm sure; you could still smell the smoke and everything.

MH: Do you remember being at Dachau?

PD: Do I remember being at Dachau?

MH: Yes.

PD: You know, one concentration camp was like any other concentration camp. When you went through a dozen of them and all that, you didn't know if you're coming or going.

MH: Right. What memories do you have of these places?

PD: Well, they weren't exactly (inaudible) parties. They were killers.

MH: Right.

WD: He has pictures of feeding the prisoners; he has pictures of a religious ceremony. Do you remember that, Phil?

PD: Winnie, you're going to have to help find all of these, if we ever do find them.

WD: You will find them. You have them.

MH: The religious ceremony was at Dachau a couple of days after liberation, I think.

WD: Correct. He has some pictures of the prisoners—former prisoners—and the flags that they were flying. So, he has a lot of stuff. I told you yesterday he has pictures of the guard lineup. And he has quite a few pictures.

MH: Do you—

WD: I think if he was looking at the pictures, he might remember more.

PD: Winnie, then you have to find them.

WD: Yes, I could find them.

MH: Do you remember how you felt seeing those places?

PD: How I started what?

MH: How did you feel when you saw the first of those camps?

PD: Well, I wasn't happy about it. But in one camp—the first camp I saw was pretty angry, and I wanted to shoot the camps, but if I did, I wouldn't have any film to turn over to the guys I was working for. So, I didn't get a chance. Everybody else shot them.

MH: Shot the guards, you mean?

PD: The GIs who were coming in had a—

MH: Right.

PD: At a pretty quick pace. It's a terrible thing there. It's all coming and going and all that sort of thing.

MH: Right. Did these memories come back to you later in life?

PD: It didn't go away.

MH: It didn't go away. Were you able to talk about them with your wife or your family?

PD: Did I talk about it, Win?

WD: Uh, yes, he did. I told you he made a slideshow with—had, which was about his experiences before he got to Dachau, when they first went into Germany. So, he has a slideshow that has, what, about 280 pictures he took. Which he showed to schools and had exhibitions and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

PD: Yeah, but I haven't been to that for a long time.

WD: I know; it is a while. You've done it, but you did have one at the—he had one exhibition at Roosevelt College in Chicago, both at the main campus and the other campus. He had—we have a community college. He had pictures on both of their campuses. So, he did a lot.

MH: How did you happen to become a photographer in the Army?

PD: I was a photographer in life, before the Army.

MH: So, actually you were one of the lucky ones, then, who got to do what they did instead of being handed a rifle.

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<sup>1</sup>Some of Mr. Drell's photos can be seen at <http://www.holocaustchronicle.org/DrellShow/DrellIntro.html>

PD: Well, you could say I was one of the unlucky that did it. (laughs)

WD: I can tell you that story, too.

MH: Okay.

WD: He was in Sacramento, California and he had been a counselor at a boys' camp in Chicago for quite a few years before the war. And he had some of his favorite pictures with him. They put out a call for photographers, and I told you yesterday he had all these Hollywood people that he worked with, and he went in and he showed the officers his portraits of the camp and (inaudible) and pictures. And they picked him and sent him to the Signal Corps Photo School in Long Island [New York], and then he was trained to—eventually he went up (inaudible) until he was trained to be a motion picture photographer.

PD: You're pretty good, Winifred.

WD: I remember everything, Phil.

PD: Yeah, well—

WD: You better be careful.

MH: (laughs) I'll stay out of that.

WD: I think you're wise. But that's how he got into that group, which was Colonel [George] Stevens' group.

MH: Right. When did you land in Europe?

PD: Oh, boy. All right, Win, when did I land in Europe?

WD: He was in England before D-Day.

MH: Okay, so it was in 1944 sometime?

WD: Yes.

MH: Okay, were you in the D-Day invasion?

WD: Well, he went over a couple of days later.

MH: Okay.

PD: They wouldn't let me go.

MH: Okay, and were you part of any infantry division or armored division?

PD: Not that I know of.

WD: No. No, he had this little group of four people. I told you yesterday. Two photographers—Irwin Shaw was the writer and the driver, and they had a jeep and they would meet up with the larger group at times, but otherwise they were on their own. And they found stories.

PD: You left Pinky out.

WD: I said he was a photographer.

MH: Okay, um—

WD: So, it was not like any other group that I've ever heard about in the Army, because they just had a lot of autonomy.

MH: Right.

PD: Look, I'm really—when the war ended, I forgot practically everything. Now, what was that thing called, Win?

WD: Your group?

PD: My group—my relationship?

WD: You know what, I've been trying to think of it, and I don't really remember. If I saw some of the pictures then I would know, 'cause you have everything well documented, but that—I couldn't remember the name of your group.<sup>2</sup>

MH: Okay. Do you remember if Thekla was one of the earliest camps you went to?

WD: That was just before Dachau was.

MH: Just before Dachau, okay. Okay, all right. I guess what I'd like to be able to do is look at the photos. I'm going to have to figure out when I'm coming to Chicago next.

WD: We're around, so just give us a heads up and we'd be happy to have you come over.

MH: I'd like that. Do you have—are you able to put your hands on the Thekla photos?

WD: You know, I have a lot of things in my computer, because I've been trying to make copies of it, so we have it. I'm sure I have some of them. You want to hold on? I'll go look and see what I have.

MH: Oh, I can do that. Sure. Or I can call you back. Okay....

***End of interview***

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<sup>2</sup>Mr. Drell's unit was the SPECOU group (Special Motion Picture Coverage Unit--Allied Expeditionary Force). Other members included Colonel George Stevens, Irwin Shaw, William Saroyan, and Lester Hemingway. His particular group consisted of himself, "Angie," the driver, Irwin Shaw, the writer, and "Pinky," another motion picture photographer.