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# Morris Eisenstein oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, March 19, 2008

Morris Eisenstein (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
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Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)  
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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:** Okay. And that's the Holocaust museum where?

**Morris Eisenstein:** In Florida.

MH: In Florida. Okay—

ME: And I have a tape that I gave to Steven Spielberg for *Shoah*.<sup>1</sup> So, I can make you a copy of this tape if you want to.

MH: Okay, but for right now, let me ask you a few questions. Your name is Morris Eisenstein?

ME: Right.

MH: E-i-s-e-n-s-t-e-i-n?

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<sup>1</sup>The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994, records the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, liberators, and other witnesses. The collection is currently housed at the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation Institute.

ME: Right.

MH: And your address is what, sir?

ME: ...

MH: And your phone number is....

ME: Right.

MH: What's your date of birth?

ME: August 30, eighteen [1918].

MH: You went into the Army when?

ME: I went in the Army in 1940 to forty-one [1941]. I don't recall which.

MH: What unit were you in in Europe?

ME: 42<sup>nd</sup> "Rainbow" Division, Infantry.

MH: Okay. So, that meant—you ended up in April at Dachau?

ME: Seven-thirty in the morning, April 29, forty-five [1945], I went in through the gates.  
*Arbeit macht frei.*

MH: Tell me about that.

ME: I first opened the gates.

MH: Tell me about that.

ME: Well, we were on our way to Munich, and we could smell something, and the orders came out that we should stop off at a town called Dachau to see something of interest there. We had no idea what was going on. So, we were in the town square in Dachau, and I was sitting there waiting for orders. I was in charge of a platoon. And somebody came up in a Jeep and said, "Ike, we ought to go down the road there; there's something you ought to see." So, I got in the Jeep and drove down about a quarter of a mile, and there was two stone columns with a wrought iron—wrought iron, what do you call it—

MH: Gate?

ME: Gate, and on top it said, "*Arbeit macht frei.*" So, I just went up to the gates, and (inaudible) were open. I walked inside. I was immediately surrounded by 10,000 or 12,000 people. I was terrified. I had no experience in this, in the Army and in school. Anyway, I didn't know what to do, so I figured I've got to identify myself, so—are you Jewish?

MH: Yes.

ME: Okay. Anyway, I'm in the crowd, surrounded by thousands of people. I fired a clip up in the air to quiet everybody down.

MH: From your M1?

ME: Oh, yeah, I had my M1. A clip, you know, five rounds? You ever served, I take it?

MH: Yes.

ME: So then, you know what I'm talking about?

MH: Yes.

ME: I put my rifle up above my head, and I remembered a prayer I learned in Hebrew school. I said to them, “*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech há olam shehechyanu vekiyemanu vehigyanu lazman hazeh.*” And all of a sudden they’re whispering, “(inaudible) *yid,*” and they were talking in Yiddish. Follow me?

MH: Yes.

ME: I went through everything, as you probably know, the camp (inaudible). And, see, the meticulous care of the Germans, you know, everything was piled up very neat. Matter of fact, even the hooks where they hooked the bodies were polished so you could probably shave off the hook. On the way out, I stumbled over a guy who was sitting on the ground. He was about 5’4”, and he looked like he was dying; he looked like he was dead. And I didn’t know what to do, so I figured maybe I can help him out. I wanted to make sure that he stayed there, because I knew our rear echelon and the medics and everybody else would be coming up soon. As you know, in the Army, after we take it, then everybody else comes up.

So, anyway, so I said to him, (inaudible), and he looked at me, and he was absolutely—he was about dead. At that time, I got down on my knees next to him, and in my pocket I had about 20,000 marks, which after the war was worth dollar for dollar, in my pocket. We killed some SS in a firefight the week before, and we got some loot. So I had it in my pocket, and I took it out, and I put it in his hand. And he grabbed my hand, and he said to me in Yiddish—I’ll translate for you, ’cause my Yiddish is not that good—“I cannot take this. It’s not proper. I must give you something in return.” Here’s a man who was absolutely emaciated, just about dead. You think philosophically about what he just said.

So, I looked at him, and I kept looking at the Star of David that was pinned to his uniform, and he saw me looking. He unhooked the pin and gave me the Star of David and he took the money. The Star of David, later on, I had encased in Lucite, and it’s now hanging at the museum, the Jewish War Veterans Museum in Washington, D.C. I gave it to them.

So, anyway, I called my guys. You might tell some youngsters. I went back inside through the square, sitting there waiting for (inaudible) my guys to catch up. What’s going on? And two people came into the square on bicycles, stopped about ten feet in front of me. They were talking in German, so I could understand them ’cause it’s close enough to Yiddish. The woman said to the man, “What do you do now?” and he says, “Well, you know, they’ll probably be coming after me. I think I’ll go home and I’ll wait for them.”

I knew they were bad people, so I picked up the lever on the M1 and walked toward them. I was far away from them. I was ready to kill both of them. I said to myself, “What the hell are you doing? You came here because you’re people of justice and fairness, and you gave the world what they’re living on, law and order. You can’t do that. You’re not judge and jury.” So, I turned around and walked back, and I found my guys, and we went out to Munich and we captured Munich. So, that’s essentially the long and short of it.

MH: Were you there at the same time that Lieutenant Colonel [Felix] Sparks was there?

ME: Oh, shit, he came after me. All the brass came after me. They take all the credit. That’s their deal, you know. I was on my way to Munich under artillery fire the last stronghold of Munich when all the brass, Bradley and Eisenhower and all that, and the reporters and everybody else, came there to look and see what was going on.

MH: Right, but these were—these were the guys with—

ME: Interesting sideline: Not too many people know our general, General [J. Lawton] Collins, the division commander, he came up, and he marched the whole village through the camp, led by the *bürgermeister*. You know what *bürgermeister* is?

MH: Yes. Did you see that?

ME: I didn’t see it, but you hear the rumors go around, so we know it’s true. And so, at the end of the trip, the *bürgermeister* asked the general, my general, could he borrow his gun for a minute. The general said, “What the hell,” he had a wall around him. He said, “Sure,” and he gave him his gun, and the *bürgermeister* blew his brains out.

MH: No loss.

ME: No, but interesting sideline. You know, if you were there, but everybody, they were all “*Bitte, bitte, ich nicht Nazi.*” Have you heard that one?

MH: No, I haven’t.

ME: That was the favorite expression of all the Germans. “*Bitte, bitte, ich nicht Nazi.*”

MH: What's the first part?

ME: *Bitte, bitte*, "please, please." "I'm not a Nazi. Don't kill me."

MH: Oh, "*Nicht Nazi*," got it. And, of course, nobody was a Nazi.

ME: Of course. But the interesting thing, when you got near the camp, near the end, the Germans didn't have any vehicles, so they were bringing up to the front the horse caravans, you know; and artillery, with our 240s and 455s, hit the horses. The horses, you know, they smell. There's a certain odor that goes up in the air. We could smell that when we were getting near the camp, so I knew something was going on.

MH: How did you explain what you had seen to your family?

ME: I was nauseated. I told a person later on, in Germany, where we captured his mansion; he had been an exchange professor at the University of Chicago in English literature or German literature. I said, "How could you possibly have done some of this? You people, who gave the world all the great minds in music and culture and art." He says, "What can I say? We're obeying orders." Typical German.

MH: When you came home from the war—what year did you come home?

ME: Huh?

MH: What year did you come home from the war?

ME: I came home in February of forty-six [1946].

MH: Where was home at the time?

ME: I've been out here in Florida twenty-six years.

MH: Where did you live right after the war?

ME: The Chicago area, next to Chicago in Skokie.

MH: Where'd you go to high school?

ME: Marshall High School.

MH: My father went to Marshall High School.

ME: We had a pretty good football team in our day.

MH: Yeah, you did.

ME: Made All-American (inaudible), made All-American.

MH: I went to Roosevelt High School; we lived on the North Side.

ME: Roosevelt had a basketball team.

MH: Always. So—

ME: But we had a great basketball team, too. My cousin Irv Eisenstein was the captain of the basketball team for Marshall, won 100 games straight. He got shot down his first mission in Germany. He got a ride to Iowa and volunteered for the Air Corps.

MH: When you came home, how did you tell your family what you had seen?

ME: I didn't say anything. I was always available. I've had two books written up about me, and I was on television in New York, on Public Broadcasting. There are two books; one book is called *Dachau, 29 April forty-five* [1945] by Sam Dann.

MH: I have that book.

ME: You have that one. Sam was my old buddy; we were in the same outfit together.

MH: I just went to the 42<sup>nd</sup> reunion in Mobile [Alabama].

ME: The other book is a guy by the name of Howard Jeffrey called *Tales of Valor*. *Tales of Valor*, Howard Jeffrey.

MH: What I'm asking is, how did you explain to your family things you had seen?

ME: We never talked about it.

MH: Never?

ME: No, every once in a while, somebody—I'd get calls, but I couldn't talk to—it's like if you were in the infantry and you fought, how can you explain to somebody what you did? There's no way. They wouldn't understand what you're talking about. All I could say was that I was overwhelmed. Some of the guys in my outfit who weren't Jewish, who were gentiles, they were more upset than I was at the moment.

MH: How did it affect your belief in God?

ME: How what?

MH: How did it affect your belief in God?

ME: I don't understand you.

MH: When you came back, were you a religious person?

ME: Well, I'm not terribly religious, but I'm a religious Jew. I go to *shul* all the time.

MH: But when you came back, did you still believe in God?

ME: I've always been an activist, all my life. I've been an activist for Jewish circles and for Americanism, whatever had to be. I was a former commander of the State of Illinois in Jewish War Veterans. I've always been—whatever I could do I try to do. And now, when I can't do anything physically, I try to do by giving them money. Like, three months ago, I gave the Jewish Federation in stock profits about \$8,000.

MH: What was your business, what did you do?

ME: I was a—before I retired?

MH: Yes.

ME: I was a partner in a finance company, insurance agency, and we dabbled in real estate. We kept busy. When I came back to the States, I had \$80 in my pocket. I worked like a dog. I ate salami sandwiches every day. I worked night and day, never gave up, until I finally got my feet on the ground.

MH: How did seeing what you saw at Dachau change your life? Did it?

ME: Well, that's a very difficult question to answer.

MH: I know it is.

ME: I just felt that somehow or other, you have to know more about people. You can't trust everybody. You don't know what motivates them, but you have to stay by your rules of behavior.

MH: What else can you tell me about the experience?

ME: I've been very thorough with you. I think I told you everything. If you ever get here, I'm available in the daytime. I can't drive at night because I'm partially blind, but in the daytime, if you get down here, I'd be happy to buy you breakfast or lunch.

MH: Okay.

ME: Just give me a call. Like I said, I can't do anything physically, but I can still drive in the daytime. I can always take you some place for breakfast or lunch.

MH: Okay. Thank you very, very, much.

ME: I have to tell you, Steven Spielberg from Los Angeles, (inaudible), he sent a team from Los Angeles to interview me for *Shoah*. You know what *Shoah* is?

MH: Yes.

ME: Okay. They interviewed me for the usual, you know, about three hours, and then I forgot about it. About three weeks later, I was suffering from a massive stroke. The doctors told my wife that I was clinically dead. I'd never recover. I told them, "You don't know me; I'm gonna recover," which I did. He sent me the tape of my recordings that I still have. In the letter, he tried to imply that he wanted to thank my division for going to Dachau, which wasn't so. Our objective was Munich, that was the original: sweep through and keep going.

So, I called him up to tell him that, and he says, "Eisenstein, let me tell you something. My people"—when they came to me, I was completely out, I was almost dead. And he said, "My people tell me you were in very bad shape. I'm going to tell you something, Eisenstein: when you went into Dachau, you helped save something like 10,000 or 12,000 lives, and in your condition right now, the good Lord will give you an exchange, to give you your life." Isn't that a good story?

MH: It's a good story.

ME: Who knows? (inaudible)

MH: (laughs)

ME: Anyway, I'm giving you an invitation; if you ever get down here, give me a call.

MH: Thank you very much.

ME: We won't be here during Passover, 'cause we go up north to see our kids at Passover, back in Chicago.

MH: Okay.

ME: I got to tell you, your father went to Marshall?

MH: Yes.

ME: There's a Chicago Club here in Delray [Beach, Florida], 300 members. We meet once a year, usually at the Westchester Country Club, for lunch and to bullshit. And the way they arrange—you know, 300 people, where do you sit, right?

MH: Yeah.

ME: Well, they have tables, and on each table it's the name of a high school, so you go to your high school. It's very clever, I thought.

MH: Very good. Yeah, on the west side, I lived at....

ME: I know where it was. I lived at (inaudible).

MH: I know where that is, too.

ME: I got my training, my basic training at (inaudible) on Twelfth Street on Roosevelt Road. By the pool; that's where I learned how to shoot pool and how to work for angles.

MH: Okay.

ME: I used to play ball in (inaudible) on Sunday once in a while. Softball, remember?  
The big ball?

MH: Yeah, the sixteen inch ball. Only in Chicago. Yeah.

ME: Yeah, I never knew. Like I said, I'm giving you the invitation. You ever get down here, it would be my pleasure to talk to you again.

MH: Okay, thank you very much, Morris.

ME: Okay.

MH: Bye-bye.

***End of interview***