

May 2008

Harry Gerenstein oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 10, 2008

Harry Gerenstein (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Gerenstein, Harry (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Harry Gerenstein oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 10, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 60.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/60

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

**Copyright, 2011, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.**

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.

Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00047
Interviewee: Harry Gerenstein (HG)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview date: May 10, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: October 11, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: February 16, 2010
Final Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Final Edit date: April 19, 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: Just so I have your name right, it's Harry Gerenstein, G-e-r-e-n—

Harry Gerenstein: Gerenstein. (corrects pronunciation)

MH: Gerenstein. G-e-r-e-n-s-t-e-i-n.

HG: Yes.

MH: What's your date of birth?

HG: 8-8-17 [August 8, 1917].

MH: 8-8-17. Okay. Just tell me, when did you go in the Army?

HG: December 1942.

MH: Where'd they send you?

HG: Well, from New York, they sent me, believe it or not, to the Mojave Desert for desert training. We were scheduled to go to Africa. I was in a tank division. By the time we got through with our desert training, the African war ended. So, I was very happy.

MH: So, now what do they do with you?

HG: Well, we went to a camp called Camp Cooke, which is Vandenberg Air Force Base now, and we got six months' training there. From there, we got a convoy going to England, and we arrived in England—well, arrived in Scotland—the beginning of February of 1944. Then we took a train to a camp, an old Army camp in Britain in a little town called Broadway and spent close to five months there, waiting for the invasion of France.

MH: What unit were you in at the time?

HG: Beg pardon?

MH: What unit were you in at the time?

HG: What unit?

MH: Yes. What division?

HG: I was in a tank division.

MH: Which division?

HG: 6th Armored Division.

MH: 6th Armored. Okay. So, when did they send you across the channel?

HG: It was about the middle of July of forty-four [1944]; in other words, almost a month after D-Day, because a tank division can't get in on the invasion. They only use the infantry, I guess. As a matter of fact, when I drove down to Southampton to get on the LST [Landing Ship, Tank], I took a nap. I was driving practically all night. And when I got up from my sleep—they woke me up because my vehicle has to get on the LST—I found my fingernails were manicured while I was sleeping. It was a big joke to them. Here we're going into combat, and they manicured my fingernails.

MH: Who did this? What, they brought British girls in to do this?

HG: No, one of the fellows from my outfit. I never did find out who did it. Anyway, we got on the LST, we got to France, we crossed the channel. When we got to France, I saw all those ships that they sunk there, and it was a disaster just seeing that. It was scary; I'll put it that way. Up until then, it didn't mean a thing to me. Then we got into an assembly area, into the division, and made the trip across and got together.

And instead of heading east, like going towards Germany, my division went west. The reason they went west, we were heading for the seaport city of Brest; the Germans had a submarine base there, and we were out to get them. The 4th Armored Division and the 6th Armored Division, we went to Brest; the other went to Lorient, which is also a seaport. As a matter of fact, I have an article that was in the paper that we covered 200—let's see. I forgot how many miles it was. Anyway, it was ten miles of combat in ten days. We set a record for combat in a tank division.

MH: What was your rank at the time?

HG: At that time, I was only a PFC [private first class], but right after that—once we got into combat, I became a sergeant.

MH: And you were on the tank, in the tank?

HG: No, actually, I didn't drive a tank; I drove a truck. I was in the supply outfit for the division. We supplied—my truck had all GMC parts. We supplied was parts for every truck, but we were always behind. The division is divided into three parts: Combat Command A, Combat Command B, and Reserve. Now, we always followed the Combat Command that was in action. We had to be right near them to help them with any parts they might need for breakdown. So, if the Reserve got a break or Combat Command B was somewhere behind, we just moved to the main outfit that was in combat.

I drove a truck with a trailer. We had no top, no doors, no windshield, and my partner had ammunition with a .50 caliber machine gun, what they call “ring mount.” It was on the truck, and it goes all around, and he just stood there. I drove all through France, Belgium, Luxembourg; rain or shine, we never had a top on the truck.

MH: Whose decision was that?

HG: Beg pardon?

MH: Whose decision was that, not to have a top?

HG: The Army. Because you have the ring mount with the .50 caliber machine gun; you can't have a windshield, with a reflection. And he was always on the gun. We were in combat many a time, using the .50 caliber. We have a photo that—we captured a German airfield. We captured 1,500 Germans, plus about ten to fifteen new German planes. So, the United Press took a picture of a few of us looking at one of the German planes and published that. I have the photo.

MH: You still have got the picture?

HG: Oh, yes.

MH: So, tell me about—at that point in the war, did you know anything about concentration camps?

HG: No. They never mentioned a word about it.

MH: And you hadn't heard about it from your family back home?

HG: No, nobody knew about it at that time. It seemed that when we heard about the concentration camp—that's maybe a day before we got to Buchenwald—we heard there's a concentration camp. We wanted to know what that was. We had no idea.

MH: What did they tell you it was at that point?

HG: It was a prison camp, and they called it “concentration.” As a matter of fact, about eight or nine years ago, I spoke at Nellis Air Force Base to a group, and some of them were liberated, people that were in the camp; they had plenty of guests there. I spoke there at a luncheon.

MH: Tell me about how you got to Buchenwald and what happened.

HG: Well, how I got to Buchenwald? Our radio man heard that we’d liberated Buchenwald. Each company has a radio man. And we were told—as a matter of fact, we were only a few miles from there at that time. What happened, it seems that four men—I think it was in the newspaper recently—four men and a Jeep, a captain and three enlisted men, saw Russian soldiers—not soldiers, Russian people—running. They got out of the camp somehow, and they stopped them. One fellow understood Russian, and he said they escaped from the camp.

So, they got out of the convoy—with permission, of course—and the Russian was sitting in the motor of the Jeep, and they showed us which way the camp was. And when they got there, they radioed my outfit right away for more help, medics, whatever, and the next day, we found out about it. We took the Jeep, three of us got in the Jeep and went back to the camp, and that’s when I went to the camp.

MH: Tell me what you saw. As you approach in a Jeep, you’re coming down a road or you have to go cross country?

HG: Well, it was outside of—off the main roads, or whatever. We got into the camp, and there were some medics there, and they called for other help. Anyway, we were told, “Don’t feed them; don’t give them any food. The food we’re eating will kill them.” And the wound up was—I saw the ovens there, I took some photos of it, and there was about 200 bodies in there that the Germans never had a chance to cover them up. I went into the barracks, and I saw—I don’t know if you’d call them barracks: the living quarters. I went in there, and it stunk like hell. And we stayed there not even five minutes. I couldn’t stand the odor. We took off and went back to our outfit. I only spent about a half-hour in the camp. We had to get out.

MH: What else did you see as you were walking in the camp?

HG: Well, some of the people, some of the inmates, were able to get around. Some could hardly walk; some just laid in their bunks, they couldn't move. They were in bad shape. And we did capture—I mean, the fellows that came in there the day before, they captured some of the guards, which were trying to get out. But the inmates actually held them down till we got there. And it was an awful thing to see, I'll put it that way.

MH: Did you talk about it after you left the camp?

HG: No. You know, we got into the Jeep, and not one word was said between us. We were dumbfounded. And of course, when I got home, after the Army—after the war, I should say—I showed some of the photos that I took at the camp, and a lot of people say, "It's disgusting. How could you keep these photos?" And the ones that—the ones of the pit and the ovens, I tore them up, like a dummy. It was a stupid thing to do.

MH: Because it was evidence.

HG: Well, of course, others had evidence, so it didn't matter.

MH: When did you first start—you got married when you came home?

HG: Not when I came home; about a year later.

MH: About a year later. When's the first time you told your wife about what you had seen?

HG: I really didn't talk about it. I mean, she knew I was in the Army, I was with the 6th Armored Division, and that's about it. I didn't talk about the concentration camp. I spoke about some things that were more interesting, you know, pleasant or whatever. Like during the Battle of the Bulge—I guess you heard about that—

MH: Of course.

HG: —we came into a town called Houdemont in Belgium, which is only about three or four miles from Bastogne. We used that as a base during the Battle of the Bulge. I asked the Belgian people there if we could—matter of fact, we pulled into that town; it was January 1, 1945. It was January 2, 1945, and I asked the people there, the Belgian people,

if during our time off, could we sleep near the stove on the floor in their home. So, they welcomed us. And it wound up—they had four children, two boys and two girls, and the seventeen-year-old girl got a crush on me. Any time I had my free time, she was with me, teaching me how to spin wool and other things. Matter of fact, it's over sixty years, I still write to her.

MH: Really?

HG: She's a great-grandmother now. All these years, we've been writing to each other. She writes in French, of course—or Flemish, whatever you call it—but I get somebody to read French, and I write in English, of course. And we have pictures of her. She was a sweet kid. That was a long time ago.

MH: A long time ago. So, when's the first time you talked publicly about Buchenwald?

HG: Well, let's see. I spoke to some people about it. They asked us if it's really true they had such a thing. Of course, after the war, it was in the papers and all. And I let them know I was there, and I told them some facts that—you know, what some of these inmates looked like: real skeletons; I'm surprised they were even living. But, of course, I didn't go into details with people.

MH: You felt uncomfortable yourself, or you didn't think they wanted to hear how bad it really was?

HG: Well, they didn't want to hear what I had to say, really. The few that did mention some real details, they couldn't believe it and they didn't want to hear anymore, so I never bothered talking about it.

MH: I see.

HG: It took me years before I really mentioned, you know, about Buchenwald.

MH: It's amazing that an experience that may have only lasted, what, a half hour or an hour, can—

HG: Well, it's in your mind, and you don't forget these things. It's something that I used to dream about it, but I fought it off.

MH: Has that stopped?

HG: Beg pardon?

MH: Do the dreams still come?

HG: No, no. It's been a long time since I dreamt about these things. Matter of fact, it's been a long time since I even spoke about it. I don't even talk about it.

MH: Were you from a religious family before you went in the war?

HG: Well, my parents were religious, but I wasn't, of course.

MH: Did your experience in the war change any of that?

HG: In what way?

MH: Make you more religious, less religious?

HG: Well, not religion, but I just felt sorry for these people that were in the camp, you know. It bothered me. I did go to temple to pray for some of these people, and that's about all you can do.

MH: Anything else that you can recall that I haven't asked you about that deals with this subject?

HG: Well, there's other things that happened, but this is—sometime, like now, I don't even think about some of these things. Like near Brest, the city of Brest that we were supposed to liberate, we could never get in there for the simple reason that they had the whole—the Germans had it reinforced so the Army couldn't get in there. And we had the German artillery division that was coming toward us, because we were between Brest and

the road that goes to Brest, and we found out the German artillery division is going into Brest, and we're in between. So, we got out.

I was on guard duty that morning. I got off guard duty at six AM, and my general told me I have to get into a Jeep. Somebody was driving, and they put this .80 caliber machine gun on the hood of the Jeep, and two of us were driven out about a half-mile from our outfit and got into a high mount. Some tanks were there, waiting. They backed into barnyards with the tanks, waiting for the Germans to come. As a matter of fact, I'll never forget; it was my birthday that day. We wound up with our helmets, digging in for protection, and put hand grenades around us.

Luckily, U.S. P-38s, fighter planes, came in, and there was a horse-drawn division. Seems they were running short of gas, and they start shooting, and they killed the horses. Now, they couldn't bring the equipment in. So they start marching towards us, and of course, they took off their helmets and put on their overseas cap, put their hands on their heads so we don't shoot them. We captured 500 Germans that day. Of course, we put them into a field with guards, and we waited for some of the infantry to come to take over, because we couldn't stay. Just—small things I have.

MH: What about combat operations after you were at Buchenwald? Did they change because of what the Americans had seen?

HG: Well, when we captured Buchenwald, which was April 11, 1945, it was going towards the end of the war already. We wound up—we were, of course, in Germany then, and there was some opposition, you know, small groups of Germans. But we didn't have too much trouble. We did some firing with our .50 caliber. If we killed them—matter of fact, General [George S.] Patton, before we left for France, told us, "We don't take prisoners in the tank division. Either you kill them or leave them alone." Because where's a tank division going to keep prisoners?

MH: Right. Huh. "Leave them alone" meaning you just let them loose?

HG: Yeah. The infantry was behind us somewhere. There were times they were fifty miles behind us, but don't forget, they walk and we drive. In my division, nobody walked. It's all mobile.

MH: When did you finally come home to the States?

HG: In December forty-five [1945].

MH: Where did you go home to?

HG: Well, New York, where I lived. As a matter of fact, during the war, I'll never forget these little things. We were in an area where we moved in in the morning, somewhere in France, and it was a big battle during the night. And, of course, the Germans took off, and we went out looking for whatever Germans were around. We captured some, walking of course, a short distance. And my battalion doctor—each battalion has a doctor—set up a tent 'cause we had some Americans that were wounded, and we got stretchers and brought them into the tent. And he told us, "If there are any Germans that are wounded, bring them in, too," which was strange to me.

So, anyway, sure enough, I picked up a German; you know, two of us put him on the stretcher and bring him in. And the funniest thing, the doctor says to me, "Harry, don't drop him." (laughs) In other words, he knew I didn't like him. And one of my buddies—as a matter of fact, we lived in the same neighborhood—he got three bullets in his leg. I carried him in as soon as I saw him. He was in my division, but a different battalion. He was what they called armored infantry.

MH: Were you wounded at all over there?

HG: Yeah, I was wounded one time. We were attacked by nine German planes, and after the battle, I was shooting—I got a .50 caliber and was shooting them. We shot down two planes out of the nine; one came down and parachuted, and somebody was shooting the parachute. They didn't want to see him make a good landing. He was quite a ways from us. And, sure enough, he came down: once he hit the ground that was it. I'm sure he didn't live through that.

After the battle, I see that my foot's wet. I got shot in the ankle—not shot, shrapnel in my ankle. I went to the doctor, and he treated me and he said he'll put me in for a Purple Heart. And it wasn't a wound where I couldn't continue with my outfit; it's just that he treated me and bandaged me up, and that was it. It wound up—he says, "I'll put you in for the Purple Heart." I said, "Forget it, it's not that bad." Like a dummy, I turned it down.

MH: That feeling, I understand.

HG: What's that?

MH: I said, that I understand. I was in Vietnam: same kind of thing.

HG: Yeah, you get a lot of that. As a matter of fact, we liberated one place, a town in Germany where there was 120 Hungarian Jewish women that they kept—not in a camp, but they lived in the barnyard of, these German people. I guess they fed them breakfast, whatever, I don't know. And then, they marched them into the woods and had a hand grenade factory, which was camouflaged.

Anyway, we liberated them. They told us—the Hungarian women said every day they put a handful of sand in their pockets, and when they got to the factory, each one filled a hand grenade with sand instead of gunpowder. So, I took pictures. I have pictures of two of the women, and one of them told me that—oh, yeah, one of them didn't have any shoes. She wore house slippers. I had two pairs of shoes; I can only wear one, so I gave her a pair of my shoes. So, she wanted to repay me some way. I said, "Forget it." I took a picture of them, and that was it. Then we left.

MH: Was that after Buchenwald or before Buchenwald?

HG: Before.

MH: Before Buchenwald.

HG: Yeah, long before.

MH: Long before. So, when; you think in March, or even before that?

HG: I really don't remember what month that was.

MH: Would you know what town it was near?

HG: No. I have no idea. I took pictures, never marked. Once you—we stayed in one town; you could be in one town one day, and the next day in another town.

MH: Right. How did you—

HG: Somebody asked my daughter where was I stationed in Europe during the war, and my daughter said, “They’re not stationed anywhere; they move every day.”

MH: How did you find those women, the Hungarian Jewish women?

HG: I don’t know. We came into this town, we saw them, and we liberated them. The Germans took off. And they told us about—that they worked in the hand grenade factory.

MH: Were these old women, young women?

HG: Young women.

MH: And they told you they were Hungarian Jews.

HG: Yeah.

MH: You spoke Yiddish to them?

HG: Yeah, I spoke Yiddish to them. That’s one thing I was able to do.

MH: What else do you remember? I mean, this is a story I haven’t heard, and I’m really interested. What else can you tell me about that?

HG: Well, you know, we just spent one—not even a day there, you know? But I just—I felt sorry for these women, and we gave them some of our rations.

MH: I was gonna ask, did they look like they’d been fed properly?

HG: No, they looked pretty taken care of.

MH: Were they wearing regular clothes, or were they wearing prisoners'—?

HG: Regular clothes.

MH: Regular clothes.

HG: And I just spoke to two of them, so I don't know much about them.

MH: Do you still have the pictures?

HG: What's that? Beg pardon?

MH: Do you still have the pictures?

HG: Oh, yeah. Of the women?

MH: Yes.

HG: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that I kept.

MH: Would it be possible to make a copy of those pictures of the women? And I'd also like to get a picture of you from World War II; do you have one?

HG: I have many of them. (laughs)

MH: You do?

HG: What a question!

MH: What a question? Well, you know, some guys have a lot; and some guys, they moved so many times that they got lost or thrown out or whatever.

HG: Well, I kept a record of most of the photos I took.

MH: If I send you an envelope, could I borrow some of these pictures and then I'll scan and then send them back to you?

HG: I'll make you copies. What kind of pictures do you want?

MH: First of all, I'd like a good picture of you from World War II.

HG: I can make a copy of that.

MH: Okay. I'd like a picture of the women.

HG: Yes.

MH: And I'd like a current picture of you.

HG: I haven't got too many pictures of myself now, but I have pictures that I took with this Belgian girl.

MH: Okay.

HG: Like I said, I still write to her. And what else?

MH: The only thing about making copies is that they need to be good enough so that the publisher can use them.

HG: Beg pardon? Wait, I can't hear you.

MH: I said, the only thing about making copies is they need to be good enough so that the publisher can use them. See, if I—

HG: Oh, I go to Smith's Drugstore, and they have a machine there that makes copies. They look like the original ones.

MH: Okay. I mean, I'll be happy to pay for whatever it costs.

HG: What could it be? About ten cents a copy, whatever; I don't know.

MH: Do you have an e-mail address?

HG: It's no big deal.

MH: Do you have e-mail?

HG: No, I don't.

MH: No? Okay. Well, I can either mail you an envelope, or I can just give you my address, whichever works.

HG: You can mail me an envelope.

MH: Okay, I'll mail you an envelope. Tell me something: once you came back to the U.S., what did you do as a business or career for the rest of your life?

HG: Well, I was in the plumbing line before I went to the Army. As a matter of fact, I worked in Washington, D.C., I worked in Maryland in a Navy base, building the—I worked in Blackstone, Virginia, and in Blackstone, Virginia, there's an Army camp they were building, Camp Pickett. I worked ten hours a day, seven days a week. We were making good money, but what good is the money if you can't spend it? I wound up—after about six or eight months, I quit, and they said, "You can't quit; we need you," and I said, "I can't take it anymore." They said, "If you quit, you'll wind up in the Army." I said, "Anything is better than this." I didn't know any better.

MH: I see. (laughs)

HG: (laughs) So, two weeks after I quit, I got my Army notice.

MH: Okay. What did you do later on in life? You stayed in the plumbing business?

HG: Yeah, I stayed in the plumbing business.

MH: Do you have children?

HG: Yeah, I have two children.

MH: Two children.

HG: One lives in Las Vegas, that's why I'm here.

MH: Oh, okay. All right. Well, I will send you an envelope—I'll send you a letter that tells you—

HG: Send me a letter with who you are. As a matter of fact, I didn't ask you, who are you from? Who are you with?

MH: Well, the book's gonna be published by Bantam Dell Publishing, which is a division of Random House.

HG: Oh, you're writing a book about it?

MH: Yeah, I'm writing a book. This'll be my sixth book.

HG: Oh, God.

MH: I was actually—I was embedded with U.S. Air Force pararescue guys in Pakistan and Afghanistan to write a book. I wrote Michael Schiavo's book about the Terri Schiavo case a couple years ago.

HG: Somebody wrote a book about my division, and it was published.

MH: Yeah, I'm sure there's been probably several books about the 6th Armored. And, what else? Now I'm writing this book that'll be out in early 2010.

HG: I hope I'm here by then.

MH: I hope you are, too. Pronounce your last name for me?

HG: Gerenstein.

MH: Gerenstein, okay.

HG: By the way, many years ago—I say many; about ten years ago—I was in Washington, D.C., and I went to the—what's it called?

MH: The Holocaust Museum?

HG: The Holocaust Museum. And they had my division flag there, and underneath the flag, it says, "Liberated Buchenwald."

MH: Right. I know that. I've talked to a number of people from the 6th Armored.

HG: Oh, you did?

MH: Yes. I've also talked to people from the 4th Armored.

HG: How'd you get their numbers—how'd you get name and numbers?

MH: One person leads you to another person. I've been doing this now—I've been working on this for about five months, and I've probably interviewed over 100 guys by now.

HG: Oh, God. Oh, so you get all kind of stories.

MH: Yeah, all kinds of stories, all different camps, 'cause the book'll really follow the last six weeks of the war, from the time they liberated the first camp, Ohrdruf—it'll actually probably pick up right at the Battle of the Bulge, and then jump ahead to late March and then go all the way through the end of the war. So, I've been to a number of division reunions. I was just at the reunion of the 80th Infantry Division that was also at Buchenwald.

HG: Oh. Well, actually, we had our last reunion in 2000. As a matter of fact, I made a motion many years ago to have the reunion in Albuquerque—that's where I lived at that time. And Pennsylvania wanted—Harrisburg; I don't know what city—had a board meeting from the division, and they said, "Albuquerque? It's a desert." I said, "No, it's not." Anyway, I won, and I wound up having the reunion in Albuquerque at the Marriott Hotel there, and I had 700 people attend.

MH: Really?

HG: Right. I went to Old Town asking for donations from the storekeepers, and I got quite a few, some interesting donations, which we raffled off to get some money. We had a banquet for 700 people there. I also arranged a tour for Kirkland Air Force Base, which is in Albuquerque.

MH: Right. That's where they train the Air Force pararescue guys.

HG: Right. Oh, I was at the base many times, and I spoke to one of the executives there—I don't know what she was there—in the administration building. She welcomed us. I arranged for a luncheon for them; they said they can only accommodate 350 people for a luncheon. Of course, my secretary/treasurer, he announced the names in the bulletin that the first 350 would be able to attend. He said they filled it right up. Kirkland's a beautiful place. Otherwise—eh, I guess there's not much I can tell you.

MH: Okay. Well, I thank—

HG: As far as an envelope, you don't have to. Just send me who you are and give me an address, and I'll send you a few photos.

MH: Okay. Thank you very, very much, Harry. I appreciate it.

HG: Okay.

MH: Okay. Bye-bye.

HG: Take care. Bye.

End of interview