

June 2008

Harry Glenchur oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 3, 2008

Harry Glenchur (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Glenchur, Harry (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Harry Glenchur oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 3, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 62.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/62

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

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00049
Interviewee: Harry Glenchur (HG)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview date: June 3, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: November 15, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: February 17, 2010
Final Edit by: Michelle Joy
Final Edit date: March 3, 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: We're talking with Harry Glenchur, G-l-e-n-c-h-u-r, M.D., Ph.D.

Harry Glenchur: Okay.

MH: Hi. I've got a recorder running.

HG: All right.

MH: Could you give me your date of birth, please?

HG: 5-25-25 [May 25, 1925].

MH: 5-25-25. I got the e-mail that you sent me. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

HG: I come from a Chinese family in Coalinga, California. Was born there. I went to high school there, and then went to—was drafted into the Army. I was in the Army for thirty-two months.

MH: When were you drafted?

HG: I think it was April sometime, April forty-three [1943].

MH: April of forty-three [1943]. And where did they send you when they drafted you?

HG: To Fort Ord in Monterey, and then they sent me from there to Loyola, Los Angeles.

MH: To Loyola Marymount?

HG: Loyola University in Los Angeles for the Army Specialized Training Program. Most of my classmates in high school went into the Navy V-5 Program [Naval Aviation Preparatory Program], and they wouldn't take me because I was Chinese.

MH: Your last name is G-l-e-n-c-h-u-r?

HG: Yes.

MH: Not a Chinese name?

HG: No, it isn't. I think my father—I was on *60 Minutes* one time, and Mike Wallace asked me about this, and he said—I told him, “This is what my father said. His name is Gunchau, and as he came off the boat”—and Mike Wallace said, “Yeah, that's the same thing happened to me.” His name was Wallechinsky.

MH: Right. It happened to a lot of my relatives who went through Ellis Island, too.

HG: Yeah. Anyway, then I came back, and I went to University of California at Berkeley and graduated in forty-nine [1949]; University of Rochester in New York Medical School, graduated in fifty-three [1953]; and interned at University of Minnesota, residency at the VA in Minneapolis.

MH: In what specialty?

HG: Internal medicine. And then, they have a program where in your residency; you can work your residency and go to the university part-time to earn your Ph.D., which is what I did.

MH: You got your Ph.D. in what?

HG: Physiology and medicine. And then I spent a year and a half in France on a public health fellowship.

MH: And then—came back?

HG: Then I came back, and I was Chief of Infectious Diseases at a VA research hospital. And from then on, my career went downhill, because I took the wrong professional turn and went to City of Hope [National Medical Center]. But I ended up okay with the Los Angeles County Health Service. I spent twenty, thirty years with them.

MH: You have a family?

HG: Yes, but I'm divorced.

MH: Oh. Children?

HG: Four.

MH: Can we go back to World War II, after you came out of basic? How did you end up in the 89th Infantry Division?

HG: At that time, they were preparing for the invasion of Europe. You see, this ASTP program was supposed to provide you with a degree, like the Navy V-5 Program was to provide commissioned officers or deck officers. But because they needed troops for the invasion, they closed almost all the ASTP programs and the Air Cadet program. A lot of the fellows that went into the 89th Division, where we were assigned, were Air Cadets, or ex-Air Cadets, or ASTP.

MH: So, they pulled you for the 89th Division?

HG: They assigned us to the 89th Infantry Division, which I joined at Hunter Liggett Military Reservation. From there, we went to—we spent a lot of time in maneuvers there, and then went to Camp—to Raleigh, North Carolina, Camp Butner. I was there for a year or so before we went overseas.

And there—I don't know whether this is pertinent or not, but in retrospect, I applied for infantry OCS [Officer Candidate School] there, in North Carolina, and I never heard anything about it. So, I went overseas, finished the war, and then I applied again, and they had told me they'd lost my papers. I suspect that was because they didn't think that I would make a good officer, but they wouldn't tell me that. Anyway—

MH: What rank were you when you went overseas?

HG: PFC [private first class].

MH: And you went over by ship?

HG: Yes.

MH: To Le Havre?

HG: Southampton.

MH: Southampton, okay.

HG: And then to Le Havre.

MH: All right. And then what happened to you?

HG: Well, we were billeted in Camp Lucky Strike. You know about the—

MH: The cigarette camps.

HG: —cigarette camps?

MH: Yes.

HG: Went to Lucky Strike, where there was a shortage of food. On the boat, which took eleven days, I was seasick for ten of those days. Couldn't eat, just constant vomiting. And so, when I got off the boat at Le Havre and Lucky Strike, I was really hungry, and then they didn't have enough food for us, until one day the food did come in, and I ate seventeen pancakes.

MH: Seventeen pound cakes?

HG: Pancakes.

MH: Oh, pancakes. Yes.

HG: We were okay after that.

MH: They didn't give you K rations or C rations?

HG: They didn't have any until later on.

MH: Oh. How long did you stay at Lucky Strike?

HG: I don't recall, but it was at least weeks, if not months. But it was snowing and muddy and you had to walk maybe a quarter mile to go to the bathroom. It was miserable. We lived in tents there.

MH: And then when you were there, had the Battle of the Bulge taken place, or did they send you up there for it?

HG: Well, when we shipped out, it was—I remember we went through Eu, E-u, France, and I think there we began to be the reserve for the Battle of the Bulge. And then from Eu, we went through Trier through Germany.

MH: You're traveling in, what, deuce-and-a-halves [trucks] or Jeeps?

HG: One-and-a-half, because I was in an anti-tank platoon. We pulled a 57mm anti-tank gun, and it was a one-and-a-half-ton truck.

MH: So, you went from France directly to Germany?

HG: Yes. Well, we went through, I think—

MH: Belgium?

HG: Luxembourg, and Belgium, too.

MH: Do you remember crossing into Germany?

HG: Yes. You see, I remarked to my fellow soldiers that France was a disappointment, because there was no greenery, and the people were very dour, and not smiling and not happy. And it wasn't until we got into Germany—and I thought it was paradoxical that here was the enemy, and the people were much—seemed much happier and cooperative, and the scenery and the housing and the structures were much more luxurious than they were in France.

MH: What do you think accounted for the people being happier?

HG: I don't know. I was seventeen, eighteen, then, so I wasn't thinking very much. I do remember that a friend of mine—he was a driver of the truck—and I were walking in Eu, E-u, and this Frenchman came up and invited us for dinner. Neither one of us spoke French, and he didn't speak English. So, it was very nice of the man to invite us to dinner. And we were just young kids. We didn't appreciate it, until I thought about these things later on.

Also, the French did show appreciation by putting on a show for us, which was a play by all men, speaking in French—you know how the French smoke cigarettes?

MH: Yes.

HG: —smoking all the time. And here the whole—almost the whole regiment was sitting there in the audience, not understanding what the hell is going on. (laughs)

MH: That had to be a strange experience.

HG: Yeah.

MH: So, then you get into Germany. Do you remember where you crossed into it, what the first city you came to was?

HG: Trier.

MH: I'm sorry?

HG: Trier's in France, I think, and from there we crossed into Germany.¹

MH: What was your objective at that point?

HG: Oh, I don't know. You know the name that I gave you, Clyde Solmon?

MH: Yes.

HG: I think he was a sergeant. He likes to write; and I think he kept a diary. If you could ask him—I was eighteen, and I just lived from day to day.

¹ Trier is in Germany, near the Luxembourg border.

MH: I've tried to find a phone number for Solmon, and I can't find anything.

HG: I don't have one, but—and I lost part of his address. But he—the 89th Infantry Division has received a lot of letters from him, and they might get you in touch with him.

MH: Okay. In any event, as April approached, do you remember what was going on at that point, April of forty-five [1945]?

HG: I can't separate out the dates. All I know is that we experienced shelling, artillery, and heard the boom of the 88s. I saw one German fighter plane that flew over, and as we ran out to get to the truck to activate the machine gun that was on the truck, he had passed us by. We saw a moderate number of destroyed tanks, German tanks, and a moderate number of both German and American dead.

MH: Military dead?

HG: I'm sorry?

MH: Military dead on the German side, or civilians? Military?

HG: Yeah, military.

MH: How did you deal with that?

HG: It didn't bother me too much. I remember a lieutenant telling us about the process of death, and I said—because soon after we saw them, a truck would come by and pick them up and throw them into the back of the truck, and the lieutenant explained death to—at least I remember. I said, "They smell like they defecated," and he said, "Yes, that's what happens when you die." So, it didn't bother us. I don't remember anybody going into hysterics about it.

MH: When you're going into a combat situation like that and the enemy has the 88s and aircraft, do you get over feeling afraid all the time, or do you always—

HG: Oh, the only time I was afraid was when they were shelling us. Usually, we'd go into a German village, and they'd tell us to go to this house. I remember one time we were billeted in the second floor of a house, and the shelling started, and we were supposed to go downstairs to some kind of shelter. I was too tired. I just lay on the floor there in my sleeping bag and squirmed. I know I squirmed, because every time a shell came over, you'd be afraid it would hit the building, but it never happened.

MH: In the note you sent me, you said you spoke German.

HG: Oh, rudimentary. You know, I had two years in high school.

MH: How did that help you in combat?

HG: Oh, it didn't.

MH: Oh. Okay. (laughs) So, you weren't pressed into service as a translator?

HG: Sometimes. I told you that I took the battalion commanders through Ohrdruf.

MH: Right. I'm coming to that.

HG: And then, I remember we arrived at a German farmhouse, and the guys in my platoon—the farmhouse was empty, and the guys killed a chicken, and we were butchering it and frying it up in butter. And I looked out the window of this kitchen, and I saw the farmer's wife coming back. And you know how naïve we were? I thought we were gonna catch hell from her, but she came bustling in, and she cooked the chicken for us.

MH: And you were able to talk to her?

HG: Yes.

MH: Was that before or after Ohrdruf?

HG: Before.

MH: Before?

HG: Yeah.

MH: Was your unit at all traveling in the same location as any American armored units?

HG: I don't remember the units, but we saw armored units going to and fro, and other troops going. I don't—you know, I didn't question these things. I know that with more experience later on, I would've written all this down.

MH: Tell me about what was going on leading up to Ohrdruf.

HG: What would happen is that the infantry unit, line unit, would take places. We were supposed to be called in if any tanks appeared, so all we did was follow these infantry units, line units, and we'd go from village to village and be billeted in some farmhouse. All I know is—let's see. The heavy drinkers in the platoon—I didn't drink at that time, but the first thing they'd go to was the brewery. It seemed like every village had a brewery. They'd get a barrel of beer and set it up on the floor, and the guys'd be drinking out of that.

MH: And so, you're moving from village to village.

HG: Yeah.

MH: Do you remember going through a village called Gotha?

HG: No, I remember—the only village I remember was named Plein, P-l-e-i-n. We were winding down the road, down a small hill, and we got shelled. And all of us—the whole column stopped. There were trenches dug by the Germans on the sides of the road. They were shaped like Ls and they were, oh, five feet deep. And we all piled in, the American soldiers, almost three feet deep. I happened to be on the top row.

And then, the next thing that happened is I looked up, and there I saw a German soldier about a quarter mile away with a mortar, and he was throwing shells into the mortar. So, I ran to the truck. I got up and ran to the truck, and pulled the—which had a .50 caliber machine gun, you know, in a ring on top of the cab—and I aimed it at this German and got one shot off. And then the gun wouldn't work anymore, because the so-called expert in our platoon had inserted the (inaudible) wrong. It was backwards.

By that time, the rest of the people were climbing out of the trenches. We got a 57mm gun going, and we fired I don't know how many shots. But I saw this German soldier hit. He went six feet into the air from that shell. And then, everybody began shooting at the village. And as we left that night, you could see the village burning, just smoke and fire.

MH: How long after that did you come to Ohrdruf?

HG: I don't know exactly. But it was days or weeks.

MH: Okay. So, then, tell me about your first experience at Ohrdruf. How did it happen?

HG: I don't really recall. All I know is that I saw all these things, and I can't say that I was devastated. Have you seen the 89th Division history book?

MH: No, I haven't. I've seen a lot of pictures.

HG: Well, it shows pictures of Ohrdruf. But I remember seeing cord—stacks of corpses, like cordwood, and railroad cars with doors open and corpses inside.

MH: At Ohrdruf?

HG: Yeah.

MH: That's the first time I've heard that. So, there was a railroad track that went into the camp?

HG: I guess. That's my memory.

MH: Where did you see the stacks of corpses? Were they out in fields, or were they in buildings?

HG: No, they were in the Ohrdruf camp. It's just not one—I remember more than one cordwood thing, stack. Then we saw the people inside the barracks.

MH: Who had survived?

HG: Yeah.

MH: What was that like? Did you go in the barracks?

HG: Yes.

MH: Tell me about that.

HG: Well, they were very barren. They were all made of wood, and I think the beds were five deep, five or six deep. The guys were in—I think they were striped uniforms. And I think they were sometimes—it looked like there was more than one to each bunk. I don't remember saying anything to them.

MH: Even though you could speak German?

HG: Well, we just went through. This is when we first appeared. We just walked through.

MH: Do you have any idea how long before you got there the camp had been discovered by the Americans?

HG: I don't think it was discovered by my unit, so I don't know.

MH: Okay. So, when your unit went there, did your unit have an assignment, or it was just, "Let's go look at this"?

HG: We were to be billeted in Ohrdruf, that's all. It just so happened—

MH: In the camp or in the town?

HG: In the town. So, it just so happened that the camp was there, and we went through it, like, as a sort of—to view it. We weren't told to capture it or do anything with the inmates.

MH: So, you—I mean, were there—I'm just trying to establish a scene in my mind. There was barbed wire or fencing around the whole camp?

HG: You know, I don't remember.

MH: When you went into the camp, did you drive in or did you walk in?

HG: Walk in.

MH: So you're walking through gates?

HG: I don't remember that. We must have.

MH: How many buildings did you see? How many barrack buildings do you recall?

HG: Oh, I don't know. I only saw a fraction of it, but there were multiple buildings.

MH: What goes through your mind when you walk into one of these barracks and you see these people, or you see even the conditions they were kept in?

HG: Mr. Hirsh, as I told you, I was eighteen at that time. I was raised in a small town in a very conservative Chinese family, and we accepted things as they are—I did, anyway. I wasn't particularly aghast, but I knew that it was wrong.

MH: So, you walk through the barracks, and you said you toured the rest of the camp. Can you just tell me a little bit about it?

HG: We went through—my tour through the camp was only a fraction of it, so I didn't see the entire camp. I vaguely remember taking the battalion commander, Colonel Murray, through, and we saw the ovens. Were there ovens there?

MH: There was a crematorium there.

HG: Yeah, I saw that. And I remember seeing the ovens, but other than that, I don't know. Colonel Murray was like me. He didn't say very much.

MH: You mentioned something in your e-mail about the freed prisoners eating sugar beets?

HG: Yeah, the Germans—I think Ohrdruf was a farming community. They fed their cows sugar beets, or turnips or whatever; they're about the size of a cantaloupe. And they quartered their cattle underneath and they lived upstairs, and that provided some heat. I was on guard one night around eight or nine o'clock—I remember it was dark—and this *bürgermeister* came out and said this man, a prisoner, was in his living room defecating.

MH: This was in the town itself?

HG: Yeah. Because as soon as—I think the gates—as soon as we had arrived, all the prisoners just kind of scattered. And there he was. I went inside, and he was squatting on the carpet and defecating. He had diarrhea, and—I told you what had happened.

MH: Yes. What did the *bürgermeister* want you to do?

HG: He wanted me to get him out of there.

MH: And you said?

HG: I just shrugged my shoulders and said, "I'm not the police." I actually didn't blame the prisoner.

MH: I'm trying to picture a Chinese American who speaks some German with the American Army in a situation like that. It had to be—I mean, you were a unique person in that respect.

HG: Well, I didn't think I was unique.

MH: Did the Germans react differently to you than they did to Caucasian Americans?

HG: Well, Mr. Hirsh, at that time, the Germans were acquiescent in everything we wanted. Like, if we told them—part of my job as an interpreter was to tell the villagers to take three days' food and move to the other side of the village; three days' food and clothing and move. If they wandered by after we told them not to wander, they would be shot. And they would all go.

MH: That's because they were billeting American soldiers in the other houses?

HG: Yeah.

MH: And you said they were very compliant?

HG: Yes. I don't remember ever having any German civilians being resistant to what we asked.

MH: Later in life, did those images of the bodies stacked like cordwood ever come back to you?

HG: Oh, yeah, I think about it. My secretary is Jewish—at work. I told her about Ohrdruf, and she didn't believe that this had happened, so I had to bring my history book and show her that. Even then, she didn't believe that people could be so inhumane. But I think about it once in a while, like I do all the things that have happened in my life.

MH: Some of the men I've spoken with, as they've gotten older and they've retired and had more time to think, they've developed, frankly, what is post-traumatic stress disorder.

HG: No, I didn't have that. Mr. Hirsh, today's soldiers are different from when we were in, because I don't remember any of the guys in the unit having dreams or psychiatric problems. The only guy that was transferred out of the unit was the mess sergeant, and that was because he was a drunkard.

MH: Okay. Did you stay in touch with guys you were in the service with?

HG: Yes, two or three. I tried to—I called around, and I tried to get a group together so we could talk about ourselves; most of the guys I couldn't reach, and some of the people didn't seem to want to get together. But there were two people that I kept in touch with, and both are dead now. One was the truck driver, and the other was a T-5 in the communications platoon.

MH: What happened after Ohrdruf? Where did your unit go from there?

HG: Went on to the next village. I don't remember what it was.

MH: Okay. And where were you finally located when the war ended? The war ended about five weeks later, five or six weeks later.

HG: I think it was near the Czechoslovakian border. Königssee.

MH: Did you see any more camps?

HG: No.

MH: None. Okay. Were you wounded at all during the war?

HG: No.

MH: Any other thoughts about the experience?

HG: Well, I don't know whether this is self-serving or not, but the platoon sergeant—my platoon sergeant afterwards told me that—because I could type, the first sergeant used to call me in all the time to help him with the office work. But the platoon sergeant—so, I would type up whatever he wanted. A lot of these were citations, you know, for awards. And this platoon sergeant—my platoon sergeant said to me, “Harry, if you write up that incident in Plein where you got up and tried to shoot that German, I'll recommend you for the Bronze Star.” And at that time, I said that was self-serving, so I said no. And I realized he asked me to write it was because he didn't know how to write it. I should've written it, because afterwards, in the Reserves, it would've counted as an award for valor. But then, these things happen all the time.

Then, I remember a first lieutenant who asked me to write something for him, which I did. At that time, first lieutenants were very powerful. I said, “Well, okay,” and I did. I wrote it for him. I said, “What did you do?” et cetera, et cetera. He essentially did nothing, and he got a Bronze Star.

MH: I was in Vietnam, and I know of things just like that.

HG: Well, this lieutenant—his name was Davis—checked out a Jeep one time at Rouen and had me drive him to visit a girlfriend in Rouen. I sat out there, outside in the cold, while he was cavorting with a French girl. So, I don't think very highly of that.

MH: Right. Do you happen to have a photo of you from your World War II days?

HG: Yeah, I do.

MH: Is it possible to get a copy? Do you happen to have it scanned on the computer?

HG: I do, but I don't know how to send it. I'll send it to you.

MH: Okay.

HG: What's your address?

MH: You want me to just email my address to you? Would that be easier?

HG: Well, I don't know how to send the picture.

MH: Oh, okay. So, you want my mail address?

HG: Yeah.

MH: The address is....

HG: Okay. All right.

MH: If you could send me that, I really would appreciate it. I'll copy it and send it back to you.

HG: No, I don't need it.

MH: Okay. All right. I thank you very, very much for your time. I sure appreciate it.

HG: You're welcome.

MH: Okay?

HG: All right.

MH: Take care, sir. Bye-bye.

End of interview