

August 2008

Milton Harrison oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 3, 2008

Milton Harrison (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Harrison, Milton (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Milton Harrison oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 3, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 67.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/67

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

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00054
Interviewee: Milton Harrison (MH)
Interviewer: Michael S. Hirsh (MSH)
Interview dates: August 3, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: October 20, 2008
Audit Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Audit Edit date: March 3, 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 S. Hirsh: Can you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

Milton Harrison: First of all, who are you?

MSH: Oh, who am I? My name is Michael Hirsh.

MH: Right.

MSH: I'm an author. I'm working on a book with the working title, *The Last Liberators: American's Final Witnesses to the Holocaust*. It will be published by the Bantam Dell Publishing Company, which is a division of Random House. It will come out in early 2010. It will be my sixth book. I wrote Michael Schiavo's book [*Terri: The Truth*] about the Terri Schiavo case that became a *New York Times* bestseller. I was—

MH: What do you or don't you know about Buchenwald?

MSH: If you could be more direct about the question? I mean, it's—

MH: You heard my question: what do you or don't you know about Buchenwald? I'm Chairman of the Buchenwald Information Committee, and I'm one of the twenty-two original liberators of Buchenwald.

MSH: I've talked to some people who were at Buchenwald. I've talked to a couple of people who were in one of the evac hospitals that was set up there. I'm actually going to the reunion of the 80th Infantry Division in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in August.

MH: What division are you going to?

MSH: 80th.

MH: The 80th? They had nothing to do with the liberation of Buchenwald.

MSH: Well, let me ask you how you're defining "liberation."

MH: I don't have to define how. (laughs) Listen, Buchenwald was liberated by the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 6th Armored Division, twenty-two men.

MSH: Okay.

MH: Of which, to my knowledge, there are from seven to nine of us left.

MSH: Okay.

MH: Now, other people from other divisions have claimed to have been liberators, but they were not liberators.

MSH: Let me—you're—

MH: Now, hold on—hold on.

MSH: You're starting off angry at me.

MH: Hold on a minute and let me finish.

MSH: Go ahead.

MH: The Buchenwald Information Committee has all the information and they are currently in operation, and they are operated by sons and daughters, mostly of liberated people from Buchenwald. Now, what do you want to know?

MSH: Given everything you've just said, you're aware that the Holocaust Museum and the Army have also designated the 4th Armored and the 6th Armored Divisions as having liberated Buchenwald.

MH: No, the 4th Armored Division had nothing to do with it. That has been corrected.

MSH: That's been corrected?

MH: Yeah.

MSH: Okay. I know they were also at Ohrdruf.

MH: They were there, yes.

MSH: So, the museum shows the 80th Infantry of Buchenwald on April 12, it shows the 6th Armored, and again, the list I have still shows the 4th Armored on April 11. The reason —

MH: The 4th Armored was not there. The 4th Armored was on our flank when we went into Buchenwald.

MSH: What I'm trying to do is find as many people, GIs, who were there.

MH: I told you—as I told you, there are from seven to nine of us left living.

MSH: Would you concede that there were people there the day after you got there?

MH: Yes, there were.

MSH: Who saw what was going on?

MH: Yes, there were. They were from the 6th Armored Division and from two other outfits.

MSH: Okay. So, what you're saying is that your guys were there first.

MH: Correct.

MSH: I don't have a problem with that. I just want to—

MH: I'm glad you don't, because you'll get your head beat in if you did. (laughs)

MSH: See, let me tell you where I stand on liberators.

MH: I know where you stand.

MSH: No, you don't, really. I find it almost offensive that the Army and the Holocaust Museum would name people liberators, name an entire division the liberators of a camp when perhaps one small unit was at the camp—wait, let me finish. When there was no fighting to take that camp, and when the guys who were dead in the surf at Normandy Beach are just as much responsible for liberating the camp.

MH: Well, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. Normandy had nothing to do with Buchenwald.

MSH: Of course it did.

MH: It was thousands of miles north.

MSH: Of course it did. The Americans who landed in Europe are the people who were responsible for stopping this horror. And—

MH: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Let's get our stories straight. Sir, you are confused as heck.

MSH: Okay, that's what my wife says about me, too.

MH: There are hundreds—there were hundreds of men—

MSH: Right.

MH: All right, 6th Armored Division took Buchenwald, right. Now the twenty-two men from the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion, 6th Armored Division under General George Patton liberated Buchenwald. Right. After we went in and went through the camp, interviewed some of the people and the survivors and took prisoners there, some other men from the 6th Armored Division, and the following day from two other divisions, came in and had things to do with the camp. I don't have, unfortunately, right in front of me or available to my reach all that information right now.

MSH: Okay.

MH: But the Buchenwald Museum has it.

MSH: Okay.

MH: Have you contacted them?

MSH: No, I haven't contacted them—

MH: Well, why not?

MSH: Because I'm looking to talk to people like you. I don't want to talk to a museum. I don't want to go into archives where people have videotaped interviews, where people have given interviews over the years—

MH: Well, I don't—well, quite frankly, I don't recall all the information. I know the basic principles at this point, because it's so long ago.

MSH: Right. But of the men who were still alive who were there with you, how many of them do you think would be available to talk about it?

MH: That I can't give you an honest answer on, because I know what I got back from division headquarters, and the museum.

MSH: Can I talk with you about your own experiences?

MH: Yeah, sure.

MSH: You're Milton Harrison, H-a-r-r-i-s-o-n.

MH: Correct.

MSH: And your address is—

MH: What do you need my address for?

MSH: Because the publisher is going to send a copy of the book to everybody that I've interviewed.

MH: Okay, it's....

MSH: And your phone number is....

MH: Correct.

MSH: And your date of birth?

MH: 10-22-25 [October 22, 1925].

MSH: Okay, and the unit you were with at Buchenwald?

MH: 9th Armored Infantry Battalion, 6th Armored Division.

MSH: Where were you growing up, where were you before you went in the Army?

MH: Pardon me?

MSH: Where were you before you went in the Army?

MH: Where was I?

MSH: Yes.

MH: I was in Philadelphia, in high school.

MSH: And then when did you go into the service?

MH: Oh—the exact date, sir, I do not remember.

MSH: Close.

MH: But I was drafted on an error by the armed forces when I was still in high school. I was in twelfth year of high school. There were 7,000—pardon me, 70,000 of us—drafted by mistake.

MSH: So, what do you do in a case like that?

MH: What do you do in a case like that? We reported on Friday afternoon to an armory and we were sent to—well, the group I was with to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where Saturday and Sunday we took infantry basic training, finished our training, went back, graduated high school, and were called up to active duty.

MSH: And so you went on active duty and went over to Europe when?

MH: Well, I was in service in the States before I went over to Europe.

MSH: Did you form up with the division in the U.S. or—

MH: I was originally in the 1123rd Commando Intelligence Group Headquarters Company. And we were in Mississippi; we were shipped down to the Panama Canal heading for Australia, when we were transferred before entering the Panama Canal over to England. From England, after we were there for a while, we were shipped over to Paris, France, and from Paris, France, we went—oh, I forget what the heck it was, right outside of Paris, France, the name of the town. But we were shipped up to the lines and we were absorbed and taken into the 6th Armored Division.

MSH: When you're with an armored infantry unit in an armored division—fill me in on what's the difference between being in an infantry division that's riding on armor and being in an armored infantry battalion?

MH: There's no such thing. There's no differences, either. It's straight infantry or armored infantry.

MSH: Is armored infantry—your weapon was the M1?

MH: Pardon me?

MSH: Your weapon was the M1?

MH: Basically, yes.

MSH: So, you're assigned to this unit in the 6th Armored Division, and what's the first combat you see?

MH: I'll be darned if, after all these years, I remember what the first combat was.

MSH: What was the first time you had the hell scared out of you?

MH: Pardon me?

MSH: What was the first time you had the hell scared out of you?

MH: The first time I had the hell scared out of me?

MSH: Yeah.

MH: Oh, boy—well, I'll tell you this. In the armored outfit, I had a couple of times where I was the only man left from armored, you know, from attacks on us. And to tell you which battle it was, at this point I don't remember.

MSH: Were you wounded?

MH: No, thank you.

MSH: What did you know—before you got to Buchenwald, what did you know about death camps, about the Holocaust, about anything like that?

MH: Well, I have to give you a very honest answer. Before we got to Buchenwald, we knew, because we had heard through the newspaper, the *Stars and Stripes* and hearing through military reports, of other concentration camps being overrun.

MSH: So, when—did you know you were going to come to Buchenwald? Was this an assignment or something your unit just happened upon?

MH: It was something that was just happened upon.

MSH: Can you just sort of tell me the story of that day?

MH: It happened. That's all I can tell you. I'm not kidding you. It's a long time ago—

MSH: Right.

MH: And a great many things happened, and a great many things were happening, and we were separated. The battalion was separated into different areas, and the group that I was with was ordered in to capture Buchenwald, and went in and, you know, got into the camp.

MSH: Were the German guards still there?

MH: Yeah. We had to break our way into the camp. We fought our way into the camp.

MSH: So the gate was still locked?

MH: Sir, I do not remember.

MSH: Okay.

MH: And this is no baloney.

MSH: No, I believe you—

MH: This was a long time ago—

MSH: Yeah, of course; it was sixty some years ago.

MH: A lot of things—I'd have to sit down and really concentrate on them to bring it out.

MSH: Let me ask the question this way: What stands out in your mind from that day?

MH: Thank God I'm alive. And I'm not kidding.

MSH: Really. I mean, it was a pitched battle for that camp?

MH: Yeah, there was a battle to get into the camp. The twenty-two of us fought our way in.

MSH: Do you remember your reaction once you got inside and saw what it was?

MH: Pathetic.

MSH: Yeah.

MH: The people were mutilated, starved; the women were abused and degraded. The men were degraded. The children were overused and—you know, everything was in severe conditions.

MSH: Right. How did you—and I realize I'm testing your memory—how did you deal with it, personally? Seeing that sort of thing?

MH: Can't remember. Because there was so much going on, to reach in and say yes, this happened—you know, it's impossible.

MSH: Right. Right. How long did you actually stay in the camp?

MH: About six to eight hours.

MSH: And then what—do you remember the situation when you left? All the Germans were either captured or dead?

MH: Well, they were captured; there were some dead. When we left, the camp was under the United States Army control, under the 6th Armored control. The following day, some men—I think it was from the 80th Division and the 76th Infantry Divisions—came in.

MSH: You weren't there when they got there.

MH: No.

MSH: No. Okay. How did being at Buchenwald affect your life?

MH: It's a hard question to answer. It affected it, but to say specifically what it did is a little bit hard to say.

MSH: I'm curious, are you Jewish?

MH: Yes. About four or five of the men who went in of the twenty-two were Jewish.

MSH: Did the Jewish guys react differently than the other guys, as far as you could tell?

MH: No, they reacted as United States soldiers.

MSH: How could I go about finding the other people, the other men in your group who are still alive?

MH: That's a good question. I have no way of knowing. I don't know who's alive, who isn't alive, how old they are.

MSH: Does the 6th Armored have reunions?

MH: Not anymore.

MSH: Not anymore? (voices in background) Do you want me to call you back?

MH: If you need any more information, call back.

MSH: Let me call you right back.

MH: Okay.

Pause in recording

MH: Yeah.

MSH: Sorry, I should have done that before, I just didn't think of it. But you don't—you haven't had contact with any of these men?

MH: Not for quite a few years. Hold on a minute. (to wife) When was our last reunion? About ten, twelve years?

Unidentified Woman: Two thousand.

MH: Two thousand was our last reunion.

MSH: Okay. All right. This is going to be a strange question, but you didn't take any pictures in the camp, did you?

MH: You've got to be kidding.

MSH: No, I'm really not, because I've talked to guys who had liberated cameras and there were pictures that they took in Dachau, so I'm—every circumstance was different, so it's just a question that I ask. Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

MH: Oh, I've got some pictures, but they're old. They're from the service.

MSH: Yeah, from the service.

MH: Yeah.

MSH: Could I ask you to send me one and I can scan it on the computer and then send it back to you? I could send you an envelope, if that would help.

MH: I can get a copy of a picture and send it to you, if you think it's necessary.

MSH: Well, I'd like to have it, if it's okay with you. Do you have an e-mail address or not?

MH: Pardon me?

MSH: Do you have e-mail?

MH: Yeah.

MSH: What's your e-mail address?

MH: Oh, you don't need it.

MSH: Well, I was going to send you—

MH: You don't need it, period.

MSH: Okay, okay. All right. I was going to send you my address, but you know what I'll do? I'll mail you an envelope.

MH: Okay.

MSH: Okay?

MH: Right.

MSH: Thank you very much.

MH: You're welcome. And, as I said before, if you need more information about Buchenwald, the Buchenwald Association has it. And if you don't have the address, I'll be happy to send it to you. I don't have it right in front of me right now.

MSH: Okay. Thank you very much.

MH: Goodbye.

MSH: Bye-bye.

End of interview