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Eli Heimberg oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 21, 2008

Eli Heimberg (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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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, just so I have it, would you give me your name and spell it for me, please?

Eli Heimberg: First name is Eli, E-I-i, and the second name is Heimberg, H-e-i-m as in Mary-b-e-r-g.

MH: And your address, please?

EH: ...

MH: And your phone is...?

EH: Correct.

MH: You were with the 42nd Infantry Division that got to Dachau?

EH: Right.

MH: What's your date of birth, please?

EH: May 29, 1917. That makes me ninety-one.

MH: Mazel tov. When did you go in the Army?

EH: In August of—I was drafted. I've lost track. I think I went in August of 19—hey, Fran, when did I go in the Army? What year? What year did I go into the Army? Yeah.

Fran Heimberg: Nineteen forty-five.

EH: Nineteen forty-five.

MH: You went in in forty-five [1945]?

EH: Huh?

MH: You went in in forty five [1945]?

EH: I went into the Army, was drafted.

MH: Right. But 1945 was almost the end of the war. Well, we can figure it out in another way. Where were you when you were drafted?

EH: I lived in Yonkers, New York.

MH: What were you doing at the time?

EH: Wait a minute. Let's see. Yeah, I was a manager in a factory, a curtain factory.

MH: And you got drafted. When did you get to the 42nd Infantry Division?

EH: I was drafted and right after my—right after I was drafted, the first place I went was a staging area in Fort Dix [New Jersey], and I was immediately sent to Camp Gruber [Oklahoma] to the 42nd Division.

MH: Do you recall when you went overseas with the 42nd?

EH: Fran? When did I go overseas?

FH: Nineteen forty-five [1945].

EH: Nineteen forty-five [1945].

MH: What was the first action that you saw?

EH: We went up through Marseilles. I landed in France and rode up the Rhône Valley, and I think at that time, they were negotiating for peace.

MH: So, you were there after the Battle of the Bulge?

EH: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, the Battle of the Bulge was a very interesting thing. They needed infantrymen so badly that they even took the generals and moved them out from the SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force], our commanding general's troops that were his protection troops.

MH: Were you a rifleman?

EH: No, I was a chaplain's assistant.

MH: Which meant you were part of the headquarters unit?

EH: I was the chaplain, the assistant division chaplain; and, of course, being his aide, I was with him. The riflemen were sent over overseas to the Battle of the Bulge

immediately. They took every rifleman they could, and then we went over later on. I remember that we were going to Fort Dix and waited at Fort Dix on Christmas night, because it was so bad in the Battle of the Bulge that they decided to bring the division over quicker.

MH: What was your rank by the time you got to Europe?

EH: Corporal.

MH: Corporal, okay. How did you happen to become a chaplain's assistant?

EH: I was very lonely, and we used to—Friday night was the night that we washed the barracks floors. I didn't want them to think I was a goof-off, so I said I would take KP [kitchen patrol] on Sundays if I could be left off to go to services. I was very lonely, so I used to go to services every Friday night, and during services—I knew a little bit about playing an organ, so the chaplain put me to work playing the organ. But I made so many bloopers later on that I stopped playing the organ. But, anyway, he was a brand-new chaplain, and he needed an assistant, and he took me on.

MH: Okay. Had you been a very religious Jew?

EH: It was Chaplain [Eli] Bohnen.

MH: Bohnen.

EH: B-o-h-n-e-n, which means Beans.

MH: Did you come from an Orthodox Jewish family?

EH: No. I was a Conservative. But Friday nights—you know, it was a brand-new place. I was lonely at Camp Gruber, so Friday nights was a good way of going and finding solace.

MH: What did you know about the Holocaust before you went overseas?

EH: I heard about the concentration camps and Hitler's doing in Germany, while I didn't know to what extent. In other words, I didn't know—I heard about concentration camps, but I didn't know what they were.

MH: Did the Army tell you anything about them?

EH: The Army? No.

MH: No? Okay. So, once you're over in Europe and the division gets into Germany, did you hear any more about these camps being discovered?

EH: Well, first, remember, I was about six months in basic training in the States, in Oklahoma. Then when I went over, we were stationed in Salzburg [Austria], and in Salzburg, there was a DP camp, displaced persons camp: people who were formerly in the concentration camps and who were waiting to go to other places. Those who had an opportunity to go to America, which was the land of hope, were helped by relatives. Those who had no place looked forward to going to the land of hope, the last hope, Israel. Israel was then—you know, Israel was declared a state by Chaim Weizmann, the first president, in 1948, I believe. So, they looked forward to going to Israel—and that was the first thing, as a matter of fact, these people who couldn't go to Israel through the underground. They had an underground, you know.¹

MH: But the underground didn't start until after the war ended.

EH: Yeah.

MH: We're still in the war. You got to the DP camp—you saw a DP camp before you got to Dachau?

EH: No, my memory's a little mixed up on this.

MH: Tell me about getting to Dachau. What happened that day?

¹ EH is referring to the *Mossad Le'aliya Bet*, an organization that facilitated the immigration of Jews from Europe, legally and illegally, from 1937 to 1939 and again from 1945 to 1948.

EH: The chaplain decided to visit Dachau, because that day, the 45th Division and the 42nd Division, early in the morning, took over Dachau, and the 222nd Regiment of the 42nd Division took over one section. When the chaplain heard about it, we decided that he would visit the camp as soon as possible, and we took off to go to Dachau. We were in, I think, Salzburg then.

MH: And you went with the chaplain. You were driving in his Jeep?

EH: I was his assistant. I was his driver, and since he couldn't carry a rifle, I carried the rifle, too. I was the assistant to the chaplain. I was not only his guard, but helped him set up services and things like that.

MH: What was your first sight of Dachau? Do you remember?

EH: I remember very vividly—it remains as a nightmare sometimes—crossing a moat, crossing the moat on a bridge, enough for one car at a time. And on the other side of the bridge was a pile of—several big piles of clothing. Lots of clothing.

MH: Outdoors?

EH: Huh?

MH: Outdoors?

EH: I would say about three feet high and quite a few piles about ten feet square.

MH: But this is outside? Not inside a building?

EH: Outside.

MH: So, that's the first thing you see.

EH: Right.

MH: Do you remember what the chaplain said or what you said?

EH: When we crossed the bridge?

MH: Yeah.

EH: No, we were very quiet, both of us. We were observing.

MH: You cross the bridge and you're driving your Jeep.

EH: Right.

MH: And you go inside the gate?

EH: We went inside the gate.

MH: With the Jeep?

EH: With the Jeep.

MH: Okay, now what happens?

EH: And when we went in, we asked for a Jewish section, because there were other people, too, other inmates. And we went to the Jewish section there. And we saw—there weren't too many people there that were Jewish.

MH: Right, it was down to about 2,000.

EH: Yeah, we saw less than that in the barracks that we went. We saw them, they—I had a dog with me.

MH: A dog?

EH: Yeah.

MH: What kind of a dog?

EH: He was a mongrel, but he was like a mongrel—oh, what do you call it? A short-haired, about fifteen inches high, brown, and I called him—

MH: What was his name?

EH: I called him Hundt.

MH: Hundt? Okay.

EH: Which means “dog.”

MH: Of course.

EH: We went into the Jewish barracks, but there weren't too many people there; evidently, they had moved. They didn't have too many in Dachau, and they were all afraid of the dog when I came in, and I said to them in Yiddish, “Don't be afraid of the dog. He understands Yiddish, and he's not afraid, and he likes *Juden*.”

MH: How do you say that in Yiddish?

EH: “(inaudible) *nish kein* (inaudible) *yiddishe hundt*.” And I said, “(inaudible)” and I said to the dog, “(inaudible),” which means “Sit down,” and of course, he sat down because he goes by the inflection of my voice, which is the same as saying it in English, “Hundt, sit down.” He sat down, and he sat about one foot behind me on my right, and they said, “What do you call him?” and I said, “I call him Hundt.” They said, “That means dog.” I said, “Yes, I call him Dog, he calls me Man.” They (MH laughs) smiled, and I thought I'd bring a little levity into their lives.

MH: You were inside a barrack at this point?

EH: Yes.

MH: What did the barrack look like? Because I've heard nightmare descriptions of the smell and the crowding and the filth, what did this look like?

EH: It seemed to be clean. Not barracks clean like the army, but it seemed to be all right. Either that, or I didn't notice my surroundings, because if anything, I was more interested in the people. Oh, immediately, [they] said, "Thank God," and they immediately told us they had families in New York and they wanted us to get in touch with them. And wherever we could, if we could get telephone numbers, some people said, "Look, just ask for—he lives in New York, my uncle. His name is Sam Cohen. You'll find him." (MH laughs) So, we took the names anyway, and where we could find or get a telephone number, we'd take a telephone number.

MH: How did these people react to the fact that they were sitting there with a Jewish rabbi in the American army?

EH: They said—I think they said—I was more interested at that moment, I wasn't listening so much as watching their reaction, looking to see, looking around the room to see what it looked like. However, that wasn't the place where they stayed. I believe—I think they were taken out for us to see.

MH: I see. So, what happens next?

EH: Well, we took their names, and we took addresses. And we tried to call up. Chaplain Bohnen contacted people. You see, we didn't have direct lines to the United States, only on certain occasions. So, he sent letters out.

MH: So, how long did you sit in that one place with these people, and about how many Jewish inmates were in there with you, do you think?

EH: I would say around twenty-five. We were only there for about—I would say less than two hours.

MH: Did they tell you where they had come from?

EH: Oh, they were talking about the other concentration camps. They didn't say where they—they were talking about Bergen-Belsen, Birkenau. How they got to the place where we met them, I don't remember. I don't recall.

MH: Were these Hungarian Jews or Polish Jews?

EH: These were Polish Jews.

MH: Polish Jews, okay. Do you remember—

EH: By the way, the Polish Jews were the ones that were the most harassed and the most put to death. It seemed that—including Poles; they weren't there, but it seemed that Hitler had a hatred for anything Polish, including the Poles.

MH: Do any of the prisoners, these inmates, any of them particular come to mind? Did you have a conversation with any one of them?

EH: Well, I had a conversation with all of them. Well, not all of them; most of them.

MH: Any one that stands out in your mind sixty years later?

EH: No.

MH: No, okay. Then what happens? Were you there on April 29, which was the day of liberation, or were you there on the thirtieth?

EH: I believe it was the twenty-ninth.

MH: The twenty-ninth. On the thirtieth—

EH: The day, April 29, the early morning of the twenty-ninth, I think, Dachau was liberated by the 45th and the 42nd.

MH: That's right.

EH: The early morning. And we were there because we heard that it was liberated. We hopped in my Jeep, and we went over there and were there around two o'clock in the afternoon.

MH: How long do you think you stayed there?

EH: I would say less than two hours.

MH: Then went back to headquarters?

EH: Yeah.

MH: Did you go back there the next day?

EH: No. Don't forget, the division was on the move, and we had to catch up. As a matter of fact, the division had already moved, and we had to—fortunately, we had the freedom of passage from the division.

MH: Right. Was there any effort that first day that you were there to—

EH: What?

MH: Did your—did the rabbi hold any services that day?

EH: I think he had the *El Male Rachamim* there that day: the Prayer for the Dead.

MH: Where did he say that? Outdoors or indoors?

EH: No, it was indoors, in where they were. Right when we went in—don't forget, they were still prisoners—not prisoners but incarcerated, because they weren't let out into the general population.

MH: When he said the *El Male Rachamim*—

EH: *El Male Rachamim*.

MH: *El Male Rachamim*, that was in the room you were in.

EH: The same room. We only saw them in the same room. And there was a wail [that] came from everybody in remembering the dead.

MH: Did he chant it or did he read it? I mean, I know the melody to *El Male Rachamim*—I've heard it with old-time cantors, who—what's the word, (inaudible)? They're almost crying when they say it.

EH: He chanted it.

MH: And the reaction was?

EH: Not in a cantorial way.

MH: And the reaction, you said, was a wail?

EH: A wail came up and everybody started crying, or most of them started crying.

MH: That had to be an incredibly emotional moment.

EH: It was.

MH: To say that prayer at the location of so many deaths—murders, really.

EH: Right. They were death—did I mention to you they were deathly afraid of the dog?

MH: You told me that.

EH: And they told me the reason why is that the Germans used to sic on them the German police dogs.

MH: Right. Yeah, I assumed as much. When you came out of that building, do you remember if the sun was shining or if it was a cloudy day?

EH: I don't remember.

MH: What did it feel like for you to come out of that building after experiencing that moment?

EH: I was shook up. There was a gulp in my throat, and honestly, I was glad to get out of the building. It was a traumatic experience. It was traumatic; the moment that bridge we rode over the moat, and seeing the piles of clothing, told me that I was going to expect something that I would never forget. Because the piles of clothing immediately in my mind told me that there were people who wore those clothes once. And believe me, they didn't have a second set of clothes to wear.

MH: Right. When did you finally come home to the States? Late in 1945, or did you stay on occupation duty?

EH: We stayed on occupation, and I was—I was married in 1944.

MH: So, you got married just before you went overseas.

EH: Right.

MH: What's your wife's name?

EH: Frances.

MH: F-r-a-n-c-e-s.

EH: F-r-a-n-c-e-s.

MH: And so, when you came home, did you write home and tell her about Dachau?

EH: Yes. I don't know what happened to all my letters. I used to write the letters, hopefully, that I would be able to give them to my children. And I'd tell what happened by writing the letter.

MH: Eli, when did you first tell people about Dachau back in the States?

EH: I wrote it in the letter. I wrote it in my letter.

MH: But when you came home, did you ever talk to people about it, or did people ask you about it?

EH: By that time, there were a lot of people who came to the United States who were displaced persons, who were in camps that were even more brutal. Birkenau camp, another camp—a couple camps they had that were extermination camps. And by the way, the Germans called them “extermination camps,” and you know why they called them extermination camps? Because, what do you exterminate?

MH: Vermin.

EH: That's the way they saw it. See, they didn't think in terms of their killing Jewish people or innocent people. They thought they were not—they thought—in order to cover themselves, to save their minds, the things that they had done that were so terrible, they couldn't in their own minds [think] that they were killing people. They were exterminating, exterminating vermin.

MH: Do you think your experience in the war and at Dachau made you more religious, less religious, or had no effect on it?

EH: It didn't affect my religion so much as it affected my sense of identity of being Jewish.

MH: In what way?

EH: In the fact that this thing could happen to people who are no different than I was, to be picked up because of my background, my genealogy, and my religion.

MH: When did that notion strike you?

EH: The moment I—well, the moment I crossed that bridge and met with these people.

MH: Did you have children?

EH: Not then.

MH: No, I mean later.

EH: Later on, I had three children.

MH: Did you tell them about what you had seen in Dachau?

EH: Yes.

MH: How old were they when you talked to them about it?

EH: I only talked to them when the occasion was in reference to Dachau.

MH: Do you remember any of those conversations?

EH: No, I don't.

MH: I'm just wondering how a Jewish father explains to a Jewish child that he saw the most horrible thing possible.

EH: Number one, I didn't want to scare them about their genealogy, so I didn't say too much about it.

MH: Did you have nightmares about what you had seen?

EH: Yes.

MH: How long did they last?

EH: I would say it came on and off for about two years.

MH: What did you do as a business or career after you came back from the war?

EH: Well, I originally was a manager in a curtain factory in Yonkers, N.Y. Our company decided to open up and eventually make a—open up a factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts. They wanted me to be the manager, and in becoming manager, I had more responsibility. I was not only a manager, but the board elected me as president of the manufacturing organization here in New Bedford.

MH: How long did you stay with that company?

EH: Well, I came up here in 1950 and retired in 1965, but in total, I was with the company around fifty-six years. I started out originally—my job was tying boxes at twenty-five cents an hour.

MH: Where is South Dartmouth?

EH: Pardon me?

MH: Where is South Dartmouth, Massachusetts?

EH: South Dartmouth is one of the communities outside of New Bedford. It's just southeast of New Bedford.

MH: What's the VA hospital nearest to you?

EH: Pardon me?

MH: Do you know what—what's the name of the VA hospital near you?

EH: Oh, there's a hospital in—Fran! Bella! Excuse me.

MH: It's okay.

EH: Bella!

MH: It's okay. I just thought you might know. It's okay.

EH: Oh, Bella's gone? Fran, what's the name of the VA hospital over here?

FH: Brockton.

EH: Yeah, in Brockton.

MH: Oh, it's in Brockton, okay.

EH: Brockton, Massachusetts. Thank you.

MH: All right. Anything else you'd want to tell me about the experience?

EH: Nothing that comes to mind now.

MH: Okay. Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

EH: By the way, I have a picture—I don't know where it is, but I made up a collection of my experiences in World War II from the moment, including beginning of the—my first draft card to shaking hands with the officer who discharged me. The collection resides in the Jewish War Veterans Museum of Jewish Military History.

MH: In Washington?

EH: In Washington, yeah.

MH: But do you still have a photograph of yourself from World War II days?

EH: I have it somewhere, I guess. You know, I'm blind, so I can't find these things, you know.

MH: Is it likely that your wife would be able to find one?

EH: No. But you may be able to get a lot of the stuff from the collection I had at the museum.

MH: You think there's a picture of you in that collection.

EH: Oh, yeah.

MH: Okay. I'll—

EH: I wish I could give you—

End of interview