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Robert Highsmith oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 30, 2008

Robert Highsmith (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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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. I've got a recorder on.

Robert Highsmith: All right.

MH: You're Robert Highsmith?

RH: That is correct.

MH: H-i-g-h-s-m-i-t-h?

RH: That's correct.

MH: What's your address?

RH: ...

MH: And your phone number is....

RH: Yes.

MH: And your date of birth?

RH: That's correct.

MH: Your birth date?

RH: It's 7-7-23 [July 7, 1923].

MH: Okay. You were with the 11th Armored Division?

RH: No, I was with the 14th.

MH: The 14th Armored Division.

RH: Yes. Uh-huh.

MH: Okay. The camp that you got to was Ampfing.

RH: Yes, and I want to bring up something. In your letter, you have the word A-m-f-i-n-g. It's really A-m-p-f-i-n-g.

MH: A-m-p-f-i-n-g.

RH: A-m-p-f-i-n-g. It's a misspell; they probably misspelled it when they were typing the
—

MH: Oh, or I did it, one of the two. (laughs)

RH: I was gonna point the finger in the other direction.

MH: Well, that was nice of you. So, tell—when did you go in the service?

RH: I entered the service on the twenty-seventh of October in 1942.

MH: You're drafted or enlisted?

RH: I enlisted. I was a student at the Southeastern State University in Durant, Oklahoma. And in order for me to be able to finish out that semester, I joined the reserves, and was actually called up to active duty and go to basic training in May 1943.

MH: Where had you grown up?

RH: I had grown up in Rudy and Prattsville, Arkansas.

MH: Okay. So you're in the army, and how do you end up in the 14th Armored Division?

RH: Well, after I had basic training, I was assigned to go to a university in Richmond, Kentucky, and what they had there they called the ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program.

MH: Right.

RH: Have you heard of that?

MH: Yes, I have.

RH: Okay. I was studying to be a civil engineer, but the program (inaudible) and they needed personnel and I was assigned probably in 1944—by June of forty-four [1944] to the 14th Armored Division. There were about 4,000 ASTP students who went to the 14th. I was assigned to Company C, the 62nd Armored Infantry Battalion of the 14th Armored Division. And we went over into Germany in about October of 1944.

MH: So, you get there after the D-Day invasion—

RH: Yes, I did.

MH: —and before the Battle of the Bulge?

RH: Yes. Now, there was what they call a southern salient of the Battle of the Bulge in Bannstein, Germany and I was in Bannstein, Germany [*sic*] for that battle.¹ And there was a movie made of that story called *Combat Command*, starring Howard Keel.² And we lost a considerable number of our personnel there at the battle of Bannstein.

MH: Was that your first major combat?

RH: Well, no, we had had several other engagements and activity before that, but that was probably one of the most major ones. And then in Steinsfeld, Germany, which was the Siegfried Line, that was the second big one; have you heard of that one?

MH: Yes.

RH: Okay. I was in—participated in that. Those were the two—all of them were bad, but those were probably two of the most major.

MH: As armored infantry, what're you riding in?

RH: I was riding in a half-track.

MH: Okay.

RH: But not all the time, because what would happen was, if we were gonna move to attack a village or a position, we had to get down from the vehicle and go there on foot.

¹ Bannstein is actually in France, a hamlet of Éguelshardt in the Moselle *département*.

² *Armored Command* was directed by Byron Haskin and released in 1961.

MH: Did you have any choice of assignments? I mean, could you have been a tanker as opposed to being in the armored infantry?

RH: No, I did not. We were assigned to the infantry, and we did that during the entire period of the war. Now, let me bring this up: After I was discharged in 1946, I guess—probably in about January forty-six [1946]—I went back to college, got the commission, and was retired in 1967, a blue pin colonel.

MH: So, you stay—you went back and stayed in the Army?

RH: Yes, I did. Made a career.

MH: Did you serve in Korea?

RH: Yes, I did. I went back to Germany first, and I did that in 1948 and we stayed over there till 1952; and went to Fort Hood, Texas, and all the other different places.

MH: What about Vietnam?

RH: No, I retired before Vietnam. I retired in 1967. And I took note of the fact that you were—were you in the service then, or—

MH: I was in the 25th Infantry Division.

RH: Yes, okay.

MH: So, to come back to Germany and World War II, were you aware of concentration camps as you were fighting your way up there?

RH: No, not really.

MH: So the word hadn't spread; the Army hadn't done anything official to tell people.

RH: No, they hadn't. But this was supposed to be the DP [displaced persons] camp, was it not?

MH: I'm not sure; I haven't looked it up before I called you.

RH: Okay. Well, you can get on the computer and look up Ampfing, and it will come up on the computer.

MH: Yeah, I've got it.

RH: You've got it?

MH: Yeah. Were you in Mühldorf?

RH: Um, no, it was in Ampfing.

MH: In Ampfing, okay.

RH: Yes, and we were not there very long. But I have some very positive memories about some things that happened there.

MH: Tell me about your discovery of the camp. How did you first find it?

RH: We were given this as an objective, to take it and attack. We went into the area there, but all the German guards had already left by then, so it was only the individuals that were the Jewish personnel.

MH: The prisoners inside the camp—

RH: Yeah, the prisoners, uh-huh. There was only prisoners then.

MH: What did you see when you first got to the camp?

RH: Okay. What really stands out in my mind most vividly was there was about four or five of the prisoners who were standing there—now, they spoke German and I spoke English only. But about four of them were tall, their hair was unkempt. They were very, very, very skinny; they had lost a lot of weight, with one exception. There was one of the persons there—he had a haircut, was shaved, skinhead. He was fat, he had—when he smiled, you could see a stainless steel tooth there in his mouth. And I know to this good day that he was a collaborator, because his physical appearance was so much different from all the others that were there.

MH: And nobody was pointing a finger at him?

RH: Huh? No, they weren't. No, they weren't.

MH: Tell—

RH: We did not stay there very long. We left, and I'm not even sure that we spent more than one day and a night there at that camp.

MH: I mean, there's a lot of Army units who spent, you know, less than two hours at camps that they came into. Did you drive your half-track into the gates?

RH: I don't think that we did. I think that we dismounted and moved in on foot.

MH: What's your attitude at that point? I mean, is your rifle at the ready, are you thinking there's trouble, or is it—

RH: Well, you're always—when you're infantry and on the attack like that, you're always at the ready, because you don't know what you're gonna get when you get into there. Only a few days before, we had gone to another prisoner of war camp. We went into that camp and there were German guards there. And one of the individuals—I'm sorry. But he had been captured in Bannstein just about two or three months before that, and he was there and he had lost a lot of weight. He must have lost thirty or forty pounds.

MH: Did you know where this man was from?

RH: He was from our company.

MH: From your company?

RH: Yes, he was. I don't remember his name now. I could research—

MH: That's okay.

RH: I have a history of the 62nd Armored Infantry Battalion, because he was a friend of mine, but I just can't remember his name now.

MH: And where did they find him?

RH: In this camp, prisoner of war camp. Do you have a copy of the 62nd Battalion history?

MH: No, I don't.

RH: You don't have one?

MH: No.

RH: Okay.

MH: No. And that happened how long before you got to Ampfing?

RH: Probably about a week or ten days, something like that.

MH: Okay.

RH: And we went into Ampfing on 1 May.

MH: Okay. What do you think as you walk into the camp?

RH: I'm thinking that, if there are any German guards there, that we're going to take and do everything we can, you know, to eliminate 'em. (laughs)

MH: I've discovered—by now, I've interviewed probably about 150 men and four—actually four women, four nurses. And I don't know why it took me by surprise at how many of them said that after seeing the camp, you know, some people said, "We didn't take any prisoners." You know, it was—that it just affected them to the point that they just wanted to eliminate every German they saw.

RH: I don't think I had that attitude. I don't think so. Had they been, you know, willing to engage us in combat, that's one thing. But if the individual is going to surrender, you know, you don't shoot him.

MH: Even if you find out that they're SS?

RH: Even if I find out that they're SS. I only had one encounter with an SS, and that was after the war was over.

MH: Where did that happen?

RH: I think it was Berghausen, Germany, and the only reason I know that he was the SS was because he had this, you know, identifying tattoo on his arm. And after that war was already over—this was probably, let's see, June, July, something like that: a couple of months afterward.

MH: So, was he somebody who was under arrest?

RH: No, he was not. He was a civilian, and the only reason I know he was SS because I saw his identifying tattoo.

MH: So, come back to Ampfing. You're carrying, what, an M1 rifle or a carbine?

RH: Oh, absolutely. M1 rifle.

MH: And you're walking into the camp—

RH: I'm walking into the camp, and—

MH: And what do you see? Do you see many people?

RH: In my recollection, there were probably a hundred or so left, you know, prisoners at that point in time. This was on the first of May. Some other of your interviewees might have a different figure, because it could have been later in the year.

MH: So, you walk in, and?

RH: We're walking in, and these people, they come out to talk to us. And there were no SS guards, or any guards.

MH: Did it surprise you that, without guards, they had stayed in the camp?

RH: They had no way to do anything themselves. Most of them were emaciated, starved, ill; and as I understand, a lot of them died later because they had been maltreated, malnourished, and then no medication.

MH: So, they come out to talk. Do they speak English? Or did you speak—

RH: No, they didn't speak—not any of them spoke any English.

MH: Did you speak any of the languages that they spoke?

RH: (laughs) None.

MH: None. So how do you communicate?

RH: Just do. Ask 'em, you know, questions. "How are you?" I know a little German, though. "*Wie geht es ihnen?*" it means "How are you?" And "*Was ist los?*" is "What's the matter?" You know, I know just a few words. But sitting down and interview a person like you and I are doing, no, I don't have that much German. Don't have that much command.

MH: Are you—does their physical appearance repel you, or do you get—

RH: You feel very sorry for these people because of the fact that they were so malnourished and ill kept, their hair long and stringy—except this one guy. (laughs)

MH: So, what do you do? Do you go into the barracks?

RH: No, I did not.

MH: What about any other buildings?

RH: Uh, none. I did not go into any of them. We stayed out in the open areas and the streets.

MH: Was it all men, or were there women as well?

RH: No women.

MH: No women.

RH: There could have been women that I didn't see, you know, but the only people that I saw were male.

MH: Is there any—you know, was there any particular person, other than that one you saw with the stainless steel tooth, who stands out in your mind?

RH: There was one individual. He could probably be—he stood tall, I guess for Jewish.

He was probably 6'1", 6'2" tall, and if he weighed eighty pounds I'd be surprised. Very tall, but smiling. We were not very—you know, there very long.

MH: They understood that you were Americans?

RH: Oh, yes.

MH: What about the inclination to give them food?

RH: We did, but we didn't have much food ourselves. We had, you know, C rations. I can remember one town where we on attack and I don't think I had anything to eat for about three days. I finally got into a—and this was in Germany—in a turnip field, and I sat down and took a turnip and peeled the thing with my bayonet and ate it, 'cause I hadn't had anything to eat for a while.

MH: You just ate it like it was an apple?

RH: Yeah, that's right.

MH: How did it happen that American troops went without food for so long?

RH: Well, the mess hall, they didn't—you know, they stayed back in what they call rear echelon. I'm sure you've heard that term. And they would issue—

Hello?

MH: Yes, I'm here.

RH: Okay. They would issue you some C rations or K rations. And, because the source of supply wasn't all that good, they used to have something called a ten-in-one ration—have you heard of that?

MH: Yes.

RH: All right. Well, a ten-in-one was fine, but the squad was composed of thirteen people when it was up to full strength, and so you had to take them and do the best that you could as far as dolling out food. Ten people—thirteen people for ten rations. We didn't have a lot of, you know, comfort food or anything like that. You got a K ration and have a piece of cheese and some crackers in it, and that was about it.

MH: So, what were the circumstances that—you're walking around Ampfing. At what point do you figure out you have to leave and keep going?

RH: Based on, you know, orders from our unit commander. He told us to evacuate, and we went on—this was on the first of May, and I think the war was over almost immediately after that.

MH: On the eighth.

RH: On the eighth of May.

MH: How many of your men from your unit were walking around at Ampfing at that point?

RH: Probably our platoon, which could have been, you know, twenty, twenty-five, thirty people that were in there.

MH: What's the conversation that's taking place between you and your buddies?

RH: Very casual, say, "Hey, look at this guy," you know, "How 'bout this?" Or, "How could this have happened?" And we were really more concerned that, you know, leaving the area and going on whatever our next objective was, 'cause the war wasn't over at that time. We still had another week.

MH: Right. When you left, was there another unit there to replace you?

RH: I'm sure there was. But that—you know, this was real small, a small little camp; it really wasn't that big. If there was more than a hundred people in it when I was there, I'd be very surprised.

MH: Have you ever had any contact after the war with any of the survivors?

RH: No. No.

MH: How do you think seeing that has impacted your life, if at all?

RH: Not as much there as what had happened over in Bannstein and Steinfeld, because we lost more of our troops in those two battles than in anything else. But I'll always have this memory of going in and seeing these four or five people and this one guy that was—his physical appearance was so different. I'll never forget that.

MH: I'm just amazed that they didn't—

RH: I was amazed that they didn't try to kill him.

MH: Exactly.

RH: This was—I don't know when the SS troops left. I don't know. But they were so happy that the SS had gone that they were not concerned in, you know, taking and having vengeance against this one person.

MH: Did you see any other camps? You know, after Ampfing?

RH: No, no, I didn't.

MH: I've been trying to find some people from the division who went to the camp called—well, at Mühldorf—called Dachau III B.

RH: Dachau?

MH: Yeah, it was at Dachau III B. It was a sub-camp of Dachau.

RH: I have been in Dachau. I was in Dachau in, oh, 1950, fifty-one [1951], along in through there.

MH: That's when you were in the Army?

RH: (inaudible) But by that time, I had already gone back to college, got a commission, and been reassigned to Germany. And there was one thing I will always remember about Dachau, was the ovens. And then there was a tree, and on this tree had a limb that was sticking out, and the limb was just shiny because—you know, tie ropes around, hang people. And I'll never forget that.

MH: Do you have a photo of yourself from your World War II days?

RH: Probably do. I could probably get something. I got your address.

MH: If you could find me a photo from then and then a recent picture, I'd appreciate it. If you send them to me, I'll put them on the computer and I'll send them back to you.

RH: A recent picture?

MH: Uh-huh, and one from World War II.

RH: Okay.

MH: You didn't take any pictures in Ampfing, I assume?

RH: No, we didn't. No, we didn't. But I do have some pictures here. I think I have a picture taken of me in Braunau [am Inn], Austria. You know what that is, don't you?

MH: No.

RH: That's the birthplace of Adolf Hitler.

MH: Oh, okay.

RH: I'm standing out in the street, and I'm—I'm sure that that's one I can remember, but now, today, there (laughs) that was sixty-eight years ago, or fift—yeah, fifty-eight years ago. But no, it was—the war was in forty-five [1945]. That was in—

MH: Sixty-three years ago. If you can send me a picture of you from World War II and a current one, I'd appreciate it.

RH: Okay.

MH: And you've got my address there.

RH: Yes, I've got your address. Let me read it to make sure, because there was a typographical error there. It's Michael Hirsh....

MH: That's right.

RH: I know I have your right phone number....

MH: Right. Exactly. Do you have email?

RH: Yeah.

MH: What's your email address?

RH: ...

MH: Okay. Well, I appreciate your calling me. Any other guys that you know of who were there?

RH: I have not maintained any contact with people after I got out of service, and I don't

know if any—has anybody else responded to your—?

MH: Uh, one man, a man named Nathan Melman.³

RH: Nathan Milton?

MH: Melman.

RH: Melman.

MH: He was in—I'm trying to think—mechanized calvary recon.

RH: Okay. He was in 94th Recon, probably. I have—okay. Well, I was gonna look through the roster, because I am in the 62nd Division history, and it has a roster of all the people including the reinforcements that were—I think in our company, we went over with 255, that was our T.O.N.E component in our company. And there was probably close to 400 people who—because they were replacements, you know, wounded, killed and whatever.

MH: Were you wounded there?

RH: No. No. And I—the good Lord really took care of me both in Bannstein and Steinfeld, and the whole thing. I never even got a scratch. People, you know, were getting killed within feet of me and I never got a scratch. I was in the infantry platoon carrying an M1 rifle.

MH: It's—I mean, there's no rhyme or reason to it.

RH: No, there isn't. There isn't, 'cept I figure that God had a different plan for me.

MH: I suppose so. Well, thank you very, very much for calling me.

RH: Okay.

³ Nathan Melman was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00089

MH: I look forward to seeing the photos.

RH: Okay, I'll go through and I'll see what I can do for you.

MH: Okay, thank you very much.

RH: Okay. Bye-bye, Michael.

MH: Bye-bye.

RH: Bye-bye.

End of interview