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Barry Jacobson oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 18, 2008

Barry Jacobson (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: Your name is Barry Jacobson, J-a-c-o-b-s-o-n?

Barry Jacobson: Right.

MH: At.... Your phone number is ... and you were with the 63rd Infantry Division, the medical company of the 253rd Regiment.

BJ: Yes.

MH: What's your date of birth?

BJ: November 23, 1925. Actually, my given name is—I go by Barry, but my given name is Baruch. B-a-r-u-c-h. I don't know if that makes any difference to you.

MH: Which do you prefer to see used in print?

BJ: Well, I tend to use Barry.

MH: You're Jewish?

BJ: Yes. I'm not practicing, but I'm Jewish background.

MH: Right, when you said your name was Baruch, I—it was a good guess. Where you before the war?

BJ: Before the war, I was in New York City going to college.

MH: Did you get drafted or did you volunteer?

BJ: Got drafted.

MH: And when did you go into the Army?

BJ: It was February of 1944.

MH: And when did you finally go to Europe?

BJ: Went to Europe in December of 1944.

MH: And you were with the division at that time?

BJ: I went over with the division.

MH: And where did they go to?

BJ: We went into Alsace and from there, moved into Germany. I left the division long about that time.

MH: Were you in the Battle of the Bulge?

BJ: No, I was not.

MH: Did you get to any of the concentration camps or the death camps?

BJ: Well, my situation was a little different. I did not get to see the camps, but I got to—I spent some time with some of the survivors.

MH: How did that happen?

BJ: Well, I was in the military government regional office in Stuttgart. And I got into military government because I knew some German. And I and a friend—or a buddy, I guess you'd say—we heard there was a house, a big house there, where a bunch of survivors of Dachau were living. And we went over and talked to them.

MH: How far was Stuttgart from Dachau?

BJ: Oh, I think Dachau was in Bavaria. We were some miles. I'd have to look.

MH: I can find it. I just thought you may know offhand. So when you saw these people, what did they tell you? What did you talk about?

BJ: Well, they did talk about their experiences, and when they found out, there were probably about a dozen of them, of which each one was a sole survivor of a family except two, who were cousins. So, right away, [we] got the idea that there were not a lot of survivors.

MH: Where were they from?

BJ: Well, these were all Germans. They had been in Dachau.

MH: Were they Jewish?

BJ: Yes. I think they were all Jewish. I didn't really question them about it.

MH: So, what did they tell you about the experience of being in Dachau?

BJ: Well, what I got the picture that they were a combination of hard work, poor sanitation, poor nutrition and it seemed like most of them ages, I'd say, between fifteen and thirty. Younger or older apparently didn't make it. And some of the guys talked about teasing the guards until the guards got so angry they beat them, and they seemed to think that was a great triumph if they got the guards to lose control.

MH: It would seem to be an almost suicidal thing to do. No?

BJ: But apparently, apparently the guards were not killing them with (inaudible). I think they mostly died of malnutrition and disease and stuff.

MH: How did dealing with these people impact you?

BJ: Beg pardon?

MH: How did dealing with these survivors affect you?

BJ: Well, I guess I and my buddy, we sort of decided that we would make it our job, that the world would always know what happened. But it was—you know, up to that point, I was getting to feel very friendly toward the German people, and I was beginning to lose that. I knew that this was a very terrible thing, you know, so for meeting these people and from other things that I knew, if I had grown up in the hometown of either of my parents, I probably wouldn't have survived.

MH: Where were your parents from?

BJ: My father was born in Latvia in a town called Kuldīga. My mother was born in eastern Poland; they both came to the United States as children.

MH: You happen to remember the city in eastern Poland she came from?

BJ: Beg pardon?

MH: Do you remember the city in Poland she came from?

BJ: Yeah, it was Łomża, L-o-m-z-a. I think it's a fairly sizeable town now.

MH: Some of my ancestors are from that part of Poland. I was just wondering—

BJ: Apparently the culture was very Russian; my mother went to a Russian school 'til she was about maybe nine years old. Then they moved to the U.S. I understand she was able to read Russian.

MH: When did you finally come home from the war?

BJ: Well, it was—you know, in the fall of forty-five [1945] I got an Army occupation furlough, and then I did not get sent back. I stayed in Fort Dix, New Jersey, for a while, until I got discharged.

MH: What'd you do after discharge?

BJ: After discharge, I went back to school.

MH: And studied what?

BJ: Well, I was pre-med for a while, and then I went in the graduate program in biophysics. Got a degree in that from the University of California.

MH: In the course of your life, post-war, did the experience with those displaced people come up?

BJ: Well, I think I can say I never forgot it. You know, maybe don't remember all of the details of everything they told me, but I do remember the people and the—I remember

there were two teenage girls there, one who had an uncle in Paraguay and she had no way to communicate with him, but I did. So, I sent her—I had her write a letter—him a letter and I mailed it through the Army postal service. I don't know what became of that. And the other one had relatives in the U.S., including an aunt in Seattle, and when I came home on the Army occupation furlough, I contacted them. Later on, I learned she had gone to live with the aunt in Seattle.

MH: Did you ever see her?

BJ: I tried to look her up one time. That was—let me think. I was living—I was just passing through—I was living in California at the time. And I talked to the aunt on the telephone, from Seattle, and she told me that the—Laura, that was her name, had recently got married and she would love to hear from me. And she gave me a phone number, and it was the wrong number. So, I tried to call the aunt back, and she must have gone somewhere. I never was able to reach her during the time that I was in Seattle, so I felt kind of bad about that because maybe they thought I wasn't interested.

MH: While you were with—right after the war, when you were still working for the regional office in Stuttgart, did you ever have occasion to go to any of the camps that had been discovered during the war?

BJ: Well, I guess I never really had the opportunity, but I did get pictures, from a civilian who was an employee of the military government unit. He was a German civilian in a unit they call Special Branch, which was sort of an intelligence unit. And he gave me a whole bag of pictures of the corpses in Dachau, for which I gave him a pack of Camel cigarettes. And later, when I got back to the States, when I was at Fort Dix, the soldiers were being processed through there and I met one who was familiar—who knew about these pictures, and I got his name and serial number and the whole story about the pictures. You know, so they were definitely authentic. I still have those.

MH: How many pictures did he give you?

BJ: Oh, about half a dozen.

MH: What they show is what, the bodies at Dachau?

BJ: Yeah, they show—some of 'em show bodies stacked up, and others bodies look like they're lying on the floor somewhere.

MH: None of them happen to show American soldiers in there, do they?

BJ: Well, I don't think—no, there weren't any soldiers in these pictures. But I've got them scanned into my computer. I could send you copies if you like.

MH: I'd appreciate that. The email address I have for you is.... What does ... mean?

BJ: ... represents an experiment, my thesis experiment in graduate school. I was studying radiation effects on cells, and discovered that you get more survival from a given dose if you give it in two fractions instead of giving it all at once.

MH: Okay. And that explains the email address. I'll send you my—I'll email you so you have my address and email address

BJ: Yeah, and I can try and send you those pictures.

MH: Yeah, when you have time, I really would appreciate it.

BJ: Yeah, that will be easy.

MH: Anything else that comes to mind?

BJ: Well, one thing is before I was at Stuttgart, I was in a local government military unit in Bavaria. Some of the concentration camp survivors passed through and they all had kind of a jaundiced look, you could—almost knew right away when one was coming. But by the time I'd got to Stuttgart, these people apparently had recovered from their jaundice, looking pretty normal.

MH: They began to put on weight?

BJ: Yeah, they were—they had put on weight, and their skin was okay. There was—they had shaved their head because of lice, so the girls were wearing scarves because it was taking time to grow back.

MH: Did you ever have any hostile encounters with German citizens who were saying they didn't know, it didn't happen—

BJ: Well, one thing I seem to have heard more than once was "*Ich bin unpolitisch*," that's "I'm unpolitical." Therefore, I wasn't involved in these things; I wasn't keeping up with it. There seemed to be quite a bit of that.

MH: How'd you react to it then?

BJ: Well, I think I kind of ignored them. Because I thought that, you know, maybe they really were indifferent to politics. And maybe that's not how we're supposed to be.

MH: Was it difficult not being judgmental in that case?

BJ: Well, I think that the—I think that's not for—that sometimes—that their indifference had serious consequences to which maybe they themselves didn't understand. Another one, a young German teenager or soldier—I was—after a little while, I was at the military government headquarters in France, where I finished my training there. I stayed on a while. I was guarding and supervising some prisoners of war who were working around the camp. And this one seventeen-year-old I spent a lot of time with told me that he knew that terrible things had happened in Germany, but he didn't think that Hitler had ordered them. I think a lot of this happened in the Soviet Union also, that—I've heard that. I've never been there, but I saw a woman complaining that somebody ought to tell Stalin about all these terrible things that are happening. Not really necessary. Stalin knew perfectly well.

MH: I'm sure he did. Thank you very much for taking the time, and I'll send you an e-mail tonight.

BJ: Yeah, I'll be glad to—I can send you maybe an attachment with all of those pictures.

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

BJ: Oh, you're most welcome.

MH: Okay, take care

BJ: Yeah, you, too.

MH: Bye-bye.

BJ: Bye.

End of interview