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Shelby Keeton oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 20, 2008

Shelby Keeton (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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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.]

Shelby Keeton: Where do you live?

Michael Hirsh: I live in Punta Gorda, Florida.

SK: What?

MH: Punta Gorda, Florida.

SK: Okay.

MH: Where—why don't you—your name is Shelby, S-h-e-l-b-y, Keeton, K-e-e-t-o-n?

SK: K-double e-t-o-n.

MH: And what's your address?

SK: ...

MH: And your phone number is....

SK: Right.

MH: What's your birth date?

SK: 9-8-18 [October 8, 1918].

MH: Eighteen [1918]. So, how old are you now?

SK: I'll be ninety in just a few days.

MH: Oh. Well, happy birthday in advance. And you were with the 11th Armored Division.

SK: Yes, I was.

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

SK: Before I went in the Army?

MH: Right.

SK: I lived here in Monticello, on the farm.

MH: You were on a farm?

SK: Yes.

MH: And you were drafted, or you enlisted?

SK: I volunteered.

MH: You volunteered. And what year was that?

SK: In 1944.

MH: Nineteen forty-four. And where'd they send you?

SK: Camp Fannin, Texas. Well, I went—I was inducted in Louisville, at the Armory there.

MH: Okay.

SK: And I went to Fort Benjamin Harrison and was shipped out from there by train to Camp Fannin, Texas.

MH: Okay.

SK: Where I got my basic training.

MH: Okay. And did—go ahead.

SK: After I completed basic, I come to Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, reported there. I had ten days at home.

MH: And then they sent you where?

SK: To Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts.

MH: And you boarded a ship?

SK: Pardon?

MH: What ship did you go on, do you remember?

SK: Went over on the *General Black*.

MH: Okay. And you—

SK: Landed in Le Havre, and then from Le Havre we went on a 40 & 8 on up to Neufchâteau, France, I think it was, and then Metz; and then Metz over to Bouillon, Belgium; and then on up into the front lines at Bastogne.

MH: So, you were in the Battle of the Bulge?

SK: Yes.

MH: You were with the 11th Armored then?

SK: Yes.

MH: Do you remember your first battle?

SK: Yeah, in the Battle of the Bulge. We were down at Houffalize.

MH: Yeah, and—

SK: You got that name?

MH: The name again is?

SK: Houffalize.

MH: Houffalize? Okay. How long did that first battle last?

SK: Well, it was continuous.

MH: Okay. Were you hit at all?

SK: I was injured on the very first day of March in forty-five [1945]. A half-track and barbed wire, and the enemy was firin' their heavy artillery at us, the tank—the half-tracks and tanks were scattering for safety. My half-track caught this barbed wire fence in there and fractured my left knee.

MH: Ooh.

SK: And scratched my legs up with the barbed wire.

MH: So, what'd they do for you?

SK: Just give me first aid. I didn't want to go back to the hospital.

MH: Okay.

SK: I stayed up there and rode in the half-track and manned the machine gun.

MH: Okay. When did you first know about the concentration camps?

SK: Well, I'm not sure. It was up in April sometime, the latter part of April.

MH: Right, but they didn't tell you about it in advance?

SK: No.

MH: So, what was the first experience you had with them?

SK: At the camp?

MH: Yeah.

SK: Oh, the smell—the smell, I guess, is the first. When you was close to something—we didn't know. The smell was terrible, it was terrible. There's nothing stinks like a human being. And there were 700 or 800, something like that, bodies out there decomposing.

MH: The camp that you came to, did it have—was it a barbed wire fence or a brick wall?

SK: It had a wall around it, and a lot of barbed wire, too, on top.

MH: What did you think when you first saw it?

SK: I don't know.

MH: Okay. Did—

SK: What I thought, how could one human be so cruel and inhumane to another?

MH: Did you see live prisoners as well as dead ones?

SK: Yes, we liberated about 15,000 to 18,000 live ones, I think.

MH: Were the German guards gone already?

SK: They were gone. They took off from there on the fourth or the sixth of—I forget what day it was. But Simon Wiesenthal, he was the one that hunted these criminals; died, oh, two, three years ago.

MH: Right.

SK: He had been put in the death barracks. We tried to save his life, because had he collapsed out on a work detail, they would have executed him. And that morning, everything was quiet, no yellin' from the German SS guards, no shots being fired. Well, he didn't know what was going on, so Simon went outside. He mustered enough to get outside and see what it was. And here come this American tank, rolling up through there, and Simon wanted to touch the star on my tank. But his strength gave out oh, fifty or sixty feet before he could get to it. And he collapsed. A couple of boys picked him up by his arms and helped him, and they understood enough sign language; he wanted to get to the tank and touch the tank, the star, and they got him there, and when he touched the star, Simon fainted in freedom.

MH: Hmm.

SK: And afterwards, he told us, "Well, they will need my evidence to convict the criminals. There's a few good, decent Germans that will need my evidence to help exonerate them."

MH: Right. Did you see him there?

SK: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I had coffee with him.

MH: Where did you have coffee with him?

SK: There, up next to the crematorium.

MH: Really?

SK: Yeah, they had an office set up (inaudible). They first put him in the hospital.

MH: Okay. And he gave you his name?

SK: Oh, yeah.

MH: And you were able to speak to him?

SK: Sure.

MH: What language was he speaking?

SK: Well, he could get some English out, but mostly German.

MH: And did you speak German at all?

SK: No, no. Just enough to get by on.

MH: So, he collapsed near your tank?

SK: I wasn't in a tank, I was in the infantry.

MH: You were infantry?

SK: Yes, I was.

MH: I thought you were with the 11th Armored?

SK: I was.

MH: Oh, okay. So you were armored infantry.

SK: An armored division is composed of infantry, artillery, tanks, and tank destroyers.

MH: Got it. Okay.

SK: And artillery.

MH: So you were one of the guys riding—walking, or riding on the tanks?

SK: Well, I rode on the back of the tank that day.

MH: Okay. And just tell me what the scene was like when he and the other prisoners come toward you.

SK: What's your first name again?

MH: Mike.

SK: Mike?

MH: Yes.

SK: They looked like scarecrows, starved to death, their little tummies all pooched out from malnutrition. Skin and bones, just walking skeletons. Now, there was a few of them in pretty good shape, but not many.

MH: Okay. And when did you first see Wiesenthal come toward you?

SK: When did the what?

MH: How long were you there before Simon Wiesenthal came toward you?

SK: Oh, it was just in there—just in there.

MH: Okay. Did the tanks go in the camp or did they stay outside?

SK: They went in the camp.

MH: Okay. And a lot of prisoners try and get around the tanks at that point?

SK: Oh, yes, 'cause they knew they were being liberated.

MH: Okay.

SK: They knew it was American forces.

MH: Right. Was it quiet, or were they cheering?

SK: Well, they—you could hear 'em.

MH: But they didn't—

SK: They were kinda praisin' the Lord, I think.

MH: Okay. Which leads me to ask, were you a religious person?

SK: Oh, yes.

MH: So how—when you see something like this, what does that do to your relationship with God?

SK: It's hard to say. You're touched, it affects you, but how in the world could the Lord have let something like this happen? But it did.

MH: But it did.

SK: Yeah.

MH: How long did you stay at the camp?

SK: We were there, oh, a month and a half or something like that, I guess.

MH: So you stayed there even after the war was over, then?

SK: Oh, yeah. We had to stay there. We segregated the people according to their nationalities to send 'em home, to get 'em home.

MH: And what nationalities did you find there?

SK: Well, there were even a few from Spain there. And there was quite a few Germans that was in there, and some Austrians, and Hungarians, quite a few of them; and Pollocks, a lot of Poles, and a lot of Russians, and French.

MH: Right. Were there many Jews there, or you couldn't tell at that point?

SK: Uh, there were some, yes. I don't know how they made it, but they had, some.

MH: Yeah.

SK: Simon was a Jew.

MH: Right. So, you said you had coffee with him—was that on the first day?

SK: Oh, no.

MH: Oh, okay.

SK: He had to go to the hospital. I didn't have coffee with him until a couple of weeks after we'd liberated the camp.

MH: Oh, okay. And when you said they went to the hospital, was there a hospital in the camp, or was this an American hospital that came in?

SK: American camp field hospital set up, and to take care of 'em as best we could.

MH: How long after you got there did the field hospital get there?

SK: Oh, the next day, as I recall. I'm not sure.

MH: Okay. That was one of the evacuation hospitals?

SK: Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

SK: Well, it was a tent hospital. It was set up to try to care for 'em, but not so many of them. People had been so ill-treated and then starved to death, that averaged about fifty a day died after the first two weeks there, in the hospital.

MH: Okay. How do you personally deal with that? How do you handle that?

SK: Just the best you can. I don't know that there's any correct way. I don't think there is. You just do the best you can.

MH: Huh. Is there any point at which you say, "I can't handle this?"

SK: I don't think so. You've got to handle it. You do what you have to do.

MH: Right. What kind of orders did you get? What were you expected to do?

SK: Well, we were told to take over until we were relieved, and we were relieved by an infantry regiment that had—oh, man, I forget which regiment it was. The 90th or the 26th or something; I forget which it was.

MH: Okay.

SK: We went right out as soon as they got there.

MH: But you said you stayed there for a while.

SK: Oh, yeah. We were there a month, two months and a half.

MH: So the war was over when you were there, then?

SK: Yeah, (inaudible). It ended, I believe, on the eighth day of May.

MH: Right. And you were still at Mauthausen.

SK: Yup.

MH: Okay. Did you ever have time to sit around with your buddies and talk about what you were in the middle of?

SK: Yeah, but they're all gone now but me and one more of them.

MH: But I mean, even when you were there, you know, at night when you're sitting around eating a meal or something. What were those conversations like?

SK: Well, it was mostly about home. Wanted to get home.

MH: Right. When did you finally come home?

SK: I got home. I left Le Havre, France, on the *Marine Robin* the sixth day of August. And got home, come back through Camp Myles Standish there, close to Boston, through Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Thirty days at home.

MH: And when'd you get out of the army?

SK: October 26, forty-five [1945].

MH: When you came home, did you tell people what you had seen at Mauthausen?

SK: No.

MH: How come?

SK: You'd rather forget things. They knew that I'd been and helped liberated prison camps, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell 'em the deplorable condition the people were in.

MH: Did a time come when you finally told people?

SK: Did what?

MH: When did the time come that you finally told people?

SK: Well, not many years ago.

MH: Not that many years ago?

SK: Not many years ago, no.

MH: About when?

SK: Oh, five, six years ago.

MH: Really! You kept it in a long time.

SK: Yeah.

MH: Who did you tell?

SK: Well, I talked to my wife about it.

MH: How long had you been married before you told her?

SK: I was married when I went in the service.

MH: Oh!

SK: I had three children at that time. My youngest son was only eleven days old when I went in.

MH: Okay. So, you were married, what, sixty years before you told your wife?

SK: About fifty years.

MH: About fifty years. Was that a hard conversation to have?

SK: Well, it was. It still is.

MH: How did she react to it?

SK: She was shocked.

MH: Did she understand why you hadn't told her all these years?

SK: I think so.

MH: Yeah. After you told her, was it easier to talk about it?

SK: No.

MH: No. Did the memories—

SK: But I had to talk to somebody.

MH: Tell me why.

SK: I don't know. To get the pressure off of me, I guess.

MH: Yeah. So, all those years, you were thinking about it?

SK: Sure. You don't forget something like that. You can't forget things like that. It leaves scars on you, Mike.

MH: How did those—

SK: Your memory is scarred.

MH: Pardon?

SK: Your memory is scarred.

MH: Yeah. Does it affect you, the way you live your life?

SK: Now?

MH: Yeah.

SK: I don't know. I guess. I would say it does.

MH: I mean, that's a big burden to carry around for all those years.

SK: Oh, you can only imagine unless you've been through it.

MH: And it's more than just the war, it's what you saw at Mauthausen.

SK: Oh, yeah. It was one of the commanders—see, there was two camps there. Mauthausen—

MH: Right.

SK: —was the main camp and Gusen was the subcamp.

MH: Okay.

SK: And one of those commanders at Gusen, the inmates lynched him and hung him. He had a little twelve-year-old boy, and they brought this boy up to show him his dad hanging there dead, and the boy spit on him in disdain. He was just disgusted with his father and spit on him. But they called him "Junior." He had a .22 rifle and he would use the inmates, prisoners' heads, for target practice.

MH: Who—

SK: We heard he killed over 200 inmates, shot 'em.

MH: The kid?

SK: Yeah, a twelve-year-old kid.

MH: Who told you that?

SK: Well, the inmates told us.

MH: Oh. Okay.

SK: And he had a bird dog, and if that dog—if he'd come to a point on some prisoner, Junior would shoot him. Now, Mike, I don't think a boy like that will ever turn around and ask the Lord to save him. I don't—I just can't believe it. It was so cruel. Inhumane.

MH: I'm surprised the inmates didn't lynch the boy, too.

SK: Well, I am, too. They probably would have if the Americans hadn't put him under protection.

MH: Yeah. Did you see the boy at the camp?

SK: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MH: So you saw him when they brought—

SK: I saw him spit on his father.

MH: Really! That's got to bring you up short.

SK: Well, that just shows you how some people can be.

MH: Right. How soon after liberation did that happen?

SK: Oh, two, three days.

MH: Two or three days?

SK: Yeah.

MH: So, if the inmates caught any of the guards, they took care of them.

SK: Most of the time, they did. Yes, they did.

MH: And the Americans didn't intervene or anything.

SK: You couldn't. You couldn't.

MH: What would have happened if you had tried?

SK: I guess the inmates would have flogged us. They had one up—they had their own method of treatment. They had one [guard] up there that was real cruel to them. They had him in the cell, and there was a round peephole with a metal ring that worked back and forth from the top. You could see inside; I looked in one day. It was right next to the crematorium. I looked in there and one of them was laying there and he had his rear end towards the door that I was looking through. He didn't know I was there. And his pants—he had his underwear pulled down and he'd messed his self all over: bowel movement. But they would take him out every day, make him get down on his hands and knees, and they'd whip him. And then they'd put him back in. And the next day, they'd whip him again. I didn't do anything to stop 'em. I couldn't.

MH: Right. And there was no American officer to come back and say you had to stop this?

SK: No.

MH: Hmm. So, they kept you at that place for over a month; you must have been wanting to get out of there.

SK: Well, sure you'd like to leave there. But we had to keep them segregated in there because they turned on each other, the Pollacks and the Russians. The Poles hated the Russians, and the Russians hated the Poles.

MH: So, what was it like keeping them apart?

SK: It wasn't too bad.

MH: Did you see that we were actually doing good for the people that you'd put in the hospital? Did you ever see them come back recovered?

SK: Oh, yeah. They didn't—they wasn't completely recovered, but they were in much better condition.

MH: Right.

SK: Once they come out. But Mike, you've been starved so long you can't eat much.

MH: Right.

SK: And those people, some of them went too long. And some of the others would eat—well, if you didn't watch 'em they'd eat too much, and that'd kill them.

MH: Hmm. There's no way to prepare young American kids or anybody to see something like this.

SK: No. No. Well, they say that it never happened. So many people said it never happened.

MH: Well, there's people still saying it never happened.

SK: Well, they should've been there. Should've been there. I had several pictures of that over there, how they were handling the crematorium. They'd run out of gas in the crematorium. And they had big long handles, tongs, they'd take those tongs—one man at

the foot and one at the head—and get 'em by their ankles and up around the neck and swing 'em up on a metal slab and they was pushed into the crematorium, dumped over there, all those things. Well, they run out of gas. But they showed us how they were forced to do that.

MH: Who did they bring in—did they bring anybody in to bury the dead?

SK: Yes. They formed a trench with a bulldozer, and they got the major in the town and the civilians down there. Let them come in and laid 'em in the trench, side to side. They said they didn't know it, what's going on.

MH: That's what they always said.

SK: Oh, bull-feathers. They lied. They could smell 'em for two miles. I know it. But we didn't swallow that line from 'em. You know? We made 'em put 'em down there. They were the ones (inaudible) and we had no part in doing it, but there was—at least they got a burial. They were just buried without anything on 'em or anything like that.

MH: Right. Did any of the townspeople resist helping?

SK: They couldn't resist; we made them do it.

MH: At the point of a gun if you had to?

SK: Yes, sir.

MH: Any of them get shot in the process?

SK: No.

MH: Bayoneted?

SK: They knew they had to do it.

MH: Okay. You—I mean, you've seen—what you've seen there, I can't imagine anything more horrible.

SK: No, there's not, Mike.

MH: Did—

SK: You're writing a book?

MH: Yes.

SK: I'd like to have a book.

MH: Well, the publisher will send a copy of the book to all the men that I interview. Do you have an e-mail address, or not?

SK: No, I don't. My wife does, but I don't.

MH: Do you know what her e-mail address is?

SK: No, I don't.

MH: Do you happen to have a picture of yourself from World War II?

SK: I may have.

MH: What I'd like to get, if possible, is a picture of yourself from World War II.

SK: You write me a letter so I'll have your address.

MH: I will do that. And a picture of yourself today.

SK: Okay.

MH: I'll send you a letter and an envelope to send it in.

SK: Okay.

MH: You said you had other pictures from the camp?

SK: I had 'em, but my wife destroyed them. They were so horrible. I don't know; it was affecting her to the extent I guess she thought she'd better get rid of 'em. She's deceased now, you see.

MH: Your wife is gone?

SK: Yeah.

MH: Okay. Okay. Well, I will send you a letter, and if you could find the pictures, I'd appreciate that.

SK: Okay, I'll do that.

MH: Okay. And I thank you very, very much for taking the time to talk to me. Can I ask, what did you do as a civilian after the war?

SK: Well, I come back and farmed for a number of years, and then I got my insurance business. I'm with life insurance, and we have a home office in Louisville. And they merged out—it's now Monumental—and then with another company. I think the home office now is in New Jersey.

MH: Okay. And what kind of farm did you have?

SK: Sixteen hundred and twenty-six acres.

MH: What were you raising?

SK: General farming.

MH: General farming? Okay.

SK: Livestock: cattle, sheep, hogs.

MH: Okay. And this was in Kentucky?

SK: Oh, yes.

MH: Okay. All right. Well, I thank you very, very much for talking to me. And I'll send you that letter.

SK: Well, I hope I've been some help.

MH: You've been—you've told me some incredible things, and I really appreciate it.

SK: Well, I could probably tell you more if you had time to do it.

MH: If you have anything else you have to tell me, I'll stay on the phone with you as long as you'd like. Is there anything else that comes to mind? Or you want me—how would it be if I called you in a week or two?

SK: Be all right.

MH: Okay, I'll give you another call and see if you've thought of anything else.

SK: Okay.

MH: Thank you very much—

SK: My birthday is on the eighth day of September.

MH: Your birthday is on the eighth day of September.

SK: Sure is.

MH: Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

SK: Okay.

MH: Okay, bye-bye.

SK: Bye-bye.

End of interview