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## Jerome Klein oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, October 7, 2008

Jerome E. Klein (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
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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:** First of all, give me your full name and spell it for me.

**Jerome Klein:** Jerome, J-e-r-o-m-e, Emanuel, E-m-a-n-u-e-l, Klein, K-l-e-i-n.

MH: And your date of birth?

JK: January 9, 1925.

MH: You passed the test; you're right on all of them.

JK: (laughs)

MH: Nineteen twenty-five, which makes you eighty-three.

JK: Closing on to eighty-four.

MH: Closing on to eighty-four. Where were you before you went in the service?

JK: In Manhattan.

MH: Doing what?

JK: Going to City College.

MH: What led you into the Army, an invitation?

JK: The draft, yes. They sent me that lovely note. As a matter of fact, it was interesting that my induction was delayed and probably saved my life, because my mother pled with the draft board. At the time I had some kind of rash—I forget what it was; probably nerves about going into service—and she got a three-month postponement. So, I suspect that as a result, I probably was saved.

MH: Because you missed—

JK: The initial invasion.

MH: Okay. So, you were—

JK: Although, actually—that really doesn't tally, because I was in the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] program for a while.

MH: Oh, okay. So, you went into the service when? Nineteen forty—

JK: Forty-one [1941], I guess. I have that documented somewhere, if you want to read small print. (laughs)

MH: When did they send you to Europe?

JK: Forty-three [1943], I guess. Wait—let's see, I was—

MH: The D-Day invasion was forty-four [1944].

JK: The invasion was forty-four [1944]. Then it was—I'm sorry. Then it was very shortly after the invasion, I guess.

MH: Did you go over with a division or were you going over there as a replacement?

JK: I went with the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.

MH: Okay. And just tell me the story of what you did with the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored.

JK: I was a rifleman in an open half-track, and my job was primarily to be a presence.

MH: At what point did you ask yourself, "What kind of job is this for a nice Jewish boy?"

JK: From the very start. (laughs)

MH: (laughs) Yeah. So, you were with the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored; were you in the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion?

JK: No, it was a tank battalion, 48<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion. I still get literature from them.

MH: And you went where?

JK: We landed—in Marseilles, I think. (phone rings)

***Pause in recording***

JK: It's all so unclear any longer.

MH: Oh, what the changes are, if they know?

JH: Who knows? (laughs) I know I've lost a lot. Is that on record? (laughs)

MH: It won't matter, and it'll all be fixed, because [President George W.] Bush says so.

JK: I'm sorry that I really am not more vivid about the dates. I had some—unfortunately, I didn't keep a thorough diary, but I do have some.

MH: Okay. So, what was the first battle you were in?

JK: The only thing that I remember was being entrenched on the Maginot/Siegfried Line. We were attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup>, if I remember correctly.

MH: Third Army.

JK: Yeah. But we were in what they considered the “secondary Bulge.” That's about as much as I can remember of that, and it was not that much active fighting as waiting. I mean, when we finally moved, I remember a couple funny incidents like being up in a tree with a bunch of Germans at the base of the tree, yammering away.

MH: How'd that happen?

JK: I was not a very good soldier. I somehow became detached from my unit quite frequently. And—

MH: That can be a terminal condition.

JK: (laughs) It could have, but fortunately, I survived.

MH: How'd you end up in a tree?

JK: I heard noises, and I climbed up.

MH: And hid in it?

JK: Yeah, I was hiding there until the guys finished their conversation and moved on.

MH: How long did that take? Probably seemed like about five hours.

JK: It seemed like a week. (laughs) It was probably no more than half an hour, I guess.

MH: And then you found your unit, obviously.

JK: Yes.

MH: Okay.

JK: Oh, one of the interesting stories I was going to tell you is after the worst of the fighting was over, when we were no longer entrenched and moving quite rapidly forward, I again became detached from my unit, and I found myself in a small Alsatian village with not a soul around, in their town square. And as I was trying to decide which way to go, I noticed someone at the far side of the village waving a white flag. We approached each other, and he explained to me—incidentally, I speak some German. He explained to me that he was a German Army doctor who had been on leave in his village, and he would appreciate it if, before he surrendered, I would let him say goodbye to his wife.

So, I took him home. They kissed, and I distinctly remember turning my back and wondering how wise I was doing this. Then, afterward, he said he wanted to give me something. We went down into this *Weinkeller*, which was pretty dark, walked all the way to the back wall, which was the point I was really beginning to get a little nervous. He pulled a large stone out for the wall, reached in, and I thought, “Oh, shit, it’s over.” (laughs) He took out a box with this absolutely beautiful camera that had been expressly designed for the Luftwaffe and gave it to me as a gift. And what photographs I have of Dachau were actually taken on that camera. The camera has since been lost. I don’t know whether that’s relevant to you.

MH: It is.

JK: Okay. (laughs)

MH: It is. So then, you took him where?

JK: By that time, the outfit had caught up with me, so I surrendered him. I've often wondered whatever happened to him.

MH: What unit were you with when you got to Dachau?

JK: The 48<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.

MH: And when did you get there?

JK: When did we get to Dachau? I think it was actually the day after the initial discovery.

MH: Okay. That would've been April 30 [1945].

JK: I guess so.

MH: Did you know anything about any of the camps, about the Holocaust, at this point?

JK: No. We were told that there was this most unusual thing that we were going to see. Because word had evidently gotten back to our headquarters, and I think we were taken there more as a sightseeing event than the actual liberation. I mean, it had already been liberated.

MH: [Dwight D.] Eisenhower wanted everybody to see it, to be witness to it.

JK: Oh, yes, definitely.

MH: I mean, one of the things that he said was that we need as many people to see it now, because fifty years from now, people will say it didn't happen.

JK: And we haven't learned.

MH: True. So, just tell me about the day that you got to Dachau.

JK: Well, as a matter of fact, I even have one photograph somewhere of the, uh—inmates, I guess you'd call them—sitting behind the fence. Not all of them had left the encampment. There were still remains of human tissue around. I have a photograph of some of that.

MH: The boxcars?

JK: No, they were just littered around. There was slatted wood set up, which we were told was a drainage system, because at the very end, they couldn't dispose of all of the prisoners as quickly as they had hoped, and they had them lean over this, and they shot them. Now, we had no evidence of it; it was just what we were told. But there was evidence of human remains.

MH: What was the first sight of the camp that you saw?

JK: Actually, a moated area, and a guard post. I think a good part of this recall is based on the fact that I still have some of the photographs. I wouldn't swear that I could vividly recall all of it.

MH: You went in the outer gate?

JK: Yes, we went through the outer gate.

MH: What about the inner gates, where the inmates were?

JK: Well, that's where I saw the—no, you could actually see through the outer gates; you could see the inner gates. It was a moated area. Well, you could see the buildings, obviously.

MH: And the inmates?

JK: And the inmates. And I also witnessed a very upsetting scene. I didn't realize at the moment what it was that was happening, but these wasted inmates had ganged up on somebody and were stoning them—stoning him and killed him, and then I learned it was a prison guard who had not gotten out and had put on civilian clothes and thought he could escape, but they recognized him. And, as a matter of fact, recently I heard—I don't remember which reporter, who had been there at that same time and described that very incident.

MH: What did you see happening, and how close were you to it?

JK: Certainly no more than ten yards away. I could actually see the prisoners ganging up on someone, and I do have a photograph of a body.

MH: A lot of shouting and screaming and yelling?

JK: Oh, yes, enormous amount of noise.

MH: Men and women, or just men? Or you couldn't tell?

JK: I can't say. I can't say.

MH: Were there other Americans—

JK: In fact, I don't recall many women. I had the impression that most of the women had probably left the compound.

MH: What were the other American soldiers doing when this was going on?

JK: Gaping. I don't think anyone tried to intrude on it. We had already had some explanation of what this was all about, so it almost felt as though—

MH: In advance, they said some this might happen, or has happened?

JK: When we were told that we were going to see something unusual. Evidently, it was briefly described.

MH: So, you see this happening, and now what?

JK: Took a photograph of it and walked on. Now, Sidney [Glucksman] seems to remember more vividly our encounter than I do.<sup>1</sup> I met a number of people, spoke to a number of people, but he has a much clearer picture of our actual encounter.

MH: What do you remember of it? Where did it happen?

JK: Certainly, it was inside the inner gates; that, I recall. And I guess he introduced himself to me, because I spoke Yiddish.

MH: How would he have known that? Did he hear you talking to somebody?

JK: Probably. Well, I was speaking German to some of the others. But I think it very swiftly switched from German to Yiddish when we had a conversation. Oh, that's right. I told him how he could keep in touch with me through the unit, which is what subsequently happened.

MH: What led to you giving him that information? I mean, you must have hit it off.

JK: Well, I certainly talked about my mother's origins in Poland, where he came from. And I don't know that it went very much beyond that. We weren't at great liberty to just go on with an endless conversation. I'm not even clear about how he subsequently contacted me, but we did, after. I was in an occupation unit in a place called Tutzing am Starnberg, which was near Munich. He contacted me there, and I visited him in the apartment that he was sharing in Munich.

MH: Okay.

JK: But that isn't giving you very much more about the day in Dachau. (laughs)

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Glucksman was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00050.

MH: You remember what you remember.

JK: That's right. (laughs)

MH: What did he look like?

JK: You want to see?

MH: Sure!

JK: (looking through photo album) I did not find a photograph of the two of us together. I thought there was hardly any likelihood of that. This was probably almost the first few I had. Oh, this was the guy that they stoned to death.

MH: A very thorough job.

JK: They certainly did. There wasn't much left. Okay, this is pretty much what he looked like, and this is what I looked like then.

MH: Oh, okay. How old was he at the time?

JK: I think about seventeen.

MH: Did he tell you that he had already been working as a tailor? Or was that something that you—

JK: That came up later, yeah. By the time we'd gotten together in Munich, he told me that. Oh, this is an interesting one. This was a sort of mural that was set up between the two gas chambers, and if you can't read it, I can tell you what it says. It says, "*Reinlichkeit ist Pflicht. Hände waschen nicht vergessen.*" "Cleanliness is duty. You must wash your hands." That was right in front of the gas chambers.

MH: The gas chambers?

JK: Yeah.

MH: That's good to know.

JK: Yeah. Characteristic German thinking.

MH: This is who, or what?

JK: He was, I think, a British officer who was looking at the remains, the bodily remains. This was the inside of the gas chamber. And they had a number—I didn't understand what the coffins were doing, but they had a number of coffins, these primitive coffins, sitting around, because they weren't burying anybody; they were just shoveling them. You want to see any of the others?

MH: Sure.

JK: Oh, I showed you. Oh, this was me in front of the beer hall in Munich where the [Beer Hall] Putsch was.

MH: (coughs) Excuse me.

JK: Oh. You want to shut it off? (laughs) This is the correspondence with Sam Dunn about the other book.<sup>2</sup>

MH: Oh, okay. Tell me, what was the connection with Sidney that you had? What was his name then?

JK: Stashek, and he explained only recently why Stashek was not his birth name. He was trying to avoid being identified as a Jew and being taken off to a concentration camp. He certainly looked as though he could be Polish. So, he took a Polish name. And I knew him until he arrived here as Stashek. He signed all of his letters Stashek as well.

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<sup>2</sup> *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs*, edited by Sam Dann and published by Texas Tech University Press in 1998.

MH: What drew the two of you together? I mean, clearly you're Jewish, but there were thousands of Jews.

JK: That was it. And, I mean, he was extremely friendly. He—I don't recall whether I gave my name and information to others. I have a feeling that he was much more alert. He seemed to be less damaged than many of the other camp inmates.

MH: What did he look like physically? Was he emaciated?

JK: No. Slender, but no, not emaciated. He hadn't been in Dachau all that long. He'd gone through a succession of other camps. I have a feeling since he was valuable, I suppose, as a tailor, they probably kept him in somewhat better shape. I think they tended to be good about maintaining the ones that could be of any use to them. So, no, he was not in that bad shape.

MH: So, what happens? You're in Munich and you get together with him.

JK: Yeah, we met several times. Oh, and one of the things that sort of made our friendship a little bit more secure was that Robot camera. I—

MH: What did you call it?

JK: It was called—the model was a Robot, R-o-b-o-t.

MH: Oh, okay.

JK: Yeah. It was one of the first quick-loading kind of things. You could take rapid—a series of rapid exposures, and the way they had achieved that was by putting a long spring at the top of the camera unit that advanced the film as quickly as you shot the thing. You didn't have to pull a lever to advance the film. It did it automatically. But it was a very cumbersome thing to carry around with me, so I was trying to find out whether there was some way of modifying the spring. I didn't need thirty quick exposures. Six or seven would've done very well.

Sidney discovered that the inventor of the Robot was living in Munich, and he arranged to have the inventor modify the camera for me. So, he put a new spring device on it, which accounted for our seeing each other somewhat frequently. And then, subsequently, I brought the film that I had exposed to a Munich film processor, and we were sent back to the States before I could pick them up. I guess that was really the thing that kept the correspondence going, because I had to give Sidney my address in New York so he could pick up the film and send it to me. They gave him some of it, but not all of it. I had a whole roll on Berchtesgaden that they never returned.

MH: What kind of film was it? What size?

JK: I think it was Agfa. It was 35mm, but it had a square instead of rectangular format—as you can see from most of these contacts.

MH: So, that's what kept you in touch with Sidney.

JK: Yes. I hadn't thought about it for a while. Yeah, that's certainly what kept it going after I returned. And he sent frequent letters. He actually asked whether there was some way that we could arrange to bring him over.

MH: And then what happens?

JK: My mother was sympathetic to it, and we made the arrangements through HIAS.

MH: That's the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

JK: Aid Society, right.

MH: How long a process is that?

JK: Probably not much more than about three months. And for the—I guess he lived with us for about six months, and in the interim, he had made arrangements for his girlfriend to come over. I think he did that through relatives that she had here. And then, they subsequently married.

MH: What was it like, essentially almost adopting somebody that you had found in the midst of a horrific place like Dachau?

JK: Well, I never had any brothers or sisters, so it was for that short period like having a brother in the house.

MH: He was what, three or four years younger than you were?

JK: Yeah, must've been about three years younger. In fact, it was like having a younger brother around.

MH: What do you do with somebody who's—how did he manage to stay out of DP [displaced persons] camps over there and live in an apartment in Munich?

JK: He and several other young people that he met, I guess, in Dachau arranged to find an apartment, a vacant apartment in Munich. Whether it was vacant or whether they persuaded the vacancy, I can't be sure. (laughs)

MH: (laughs) I see. Okay. There was probably a lot of that going around.

JK: Oh, of course there was. I mean, it was a time when you had to use a lot of ingenuity to survive.

MH: He came here by ship.

JK: Yes.

MH: You remember meeting the ship?

JK: No, I don't have any recollection of all of that. And whether he was processed through Ellis Island, I can't recall, either; probably.

MH: You said he lived with you for six months. Where was that?

JK: In Brooklyn, on Lincoln Place in Crown Heights.

MH: What kind of apartment did you have?

JK: A railroad apartment. We lived there because during the Depression, there wasn't enough income to pay rent without having roomers. By the time the war was over, the roomers were no longer necessary, so there were two extra bedrooms.

MH: A railroad apartment is?

JK: A succession of rooms joined by a common hall.

MH: Okay. The rooms are off the hall?

JK: Several of the rooms are off the hall. Well, I can best describe it by explaining that there were two entrances. There was a bedroom that was the entire width of the apartment in front, a small bedroom which for years had been my room and study; and then the long hall, off which there was a bathroom and a second bedroom; and it ended in the living room, which preceded the kitchen, beyond which there was yet another bedroom. Have you never seen a railroad apartment?

MH: I've seen places like that in Los Angeles, actually. They call them shotgun apartments, 'cause you can stand at the front and fire a shotgun all the way through.

JK: (laughs) All the way through—almost all the way through. Yeah. But, as a matter of fact, there were a good many of them around in that era. They were all, for the most part, four-story, stoop-access buildings.

MH: Were you back in school?

JK: I was at City College.

MH: Studying what? What did you get a degree in?

JK: Business administration. Well, as a matter of fact—yeah. Before I went into service, I was at City College uptown, majoring in engineering, which I was assured was a hopeless thing for Jews. And, foolishly, I switched to business administration when I came back.

MH: Okay. And then what happens to you? What do you do?

JK: I didn't do anything—yeah, I'm sorry. I did have a part-time job with an accounting firm before I went into service, and they had promised that I'd have the job when I came back, but the last thing I wanted to do was count other people's money. So, I subsequently got a couple of degrees, didn't use any of them, and became a photographer instead.

MH: What did you shoot?

JK: A lot of merchandise. As a matter of fact, in addition to being a photographer, I owned a photo agency.

MH: You're representing other photographers?

JK: Others, yeah.

MH: And that's what you did for—

JK: Oh, a good many years.

MH: Were you married?

JK: I was married. That only lasted about seven years. As a matter of fact, my wife died this past July on the fifty-eighth anniversary of our wedding day—a little bizarre.

MH: Children?

JK: No.

MH: What kind of relationship have you maintained with Sidney?

JK: Well, I feel almost like a member of the family. I don't go out there for every holiday, but for every third holiday. He has a lovely family, and I feel close to all of them: two daughters and a slew of grandchildren.

MH: Do you find the interest in the relationship you have with Sidney strange, interesting, normal, abnormal?

JK: It seems quite normal. No, I don't think—I can't imagine there would be anything particularly bizarre about befriending someone who was in needy circumstances and continuing the friendship.

MH: I mean, if he had been a girl and you'd brought her over here and gotten married, it's a movie. (laughs)

JK: (laughs) Listen, you can make it a little offbeat movie. (laughs)

MH: How did the things you saw in Dachau affect you? I'm presuming that somehow they did.

JK: It did to the extent that—I don't know if I had mentioned it to you, but up until that point, I put tallis and tefillin on every morning.

MH: Really?

JK: Yes. While I was in service, even when I was in those trenches, and I did it in the half-track. All the fellows in the half-track kept quiet while I said my prayers. I'm sure they were convinced that God was protecting them along with me. And then, when I saw Dachau, I just lost faith. I have been a nonbeliever ever since.

MH: Did it happen gradually?

JK: Very, very quickly.

MH: How did you realize it?

JK: I realized that there could be no essence of any kind that, having the ability to control human behavior, would allow such a thing to happen. So, I had to believe that there was no such an essence.

MH: See, I'm with you in this, and I keep raising that issue, and people of faith—including the woman who's transcribing this—

JK: (laughs)

MH: —will say, “Well, God gave mankind free will.” And I say—

JK: Then God did a lousy job, and I can't believe that this almighty creature would have, if it existed, done such a lousy job.

MH: I'm not gonna argue with you. Kathy, you can argue with him.

JK: (laughs) Okay.

MH: What else can you tell me that might be of interest?

JK: About my experience during the war?

MH: Or its impact on you afterwards.

JK: That would be relevant to what you're doing? (pauses) I don't know why I'm freezing, but I am. I'm usually very talkative.

MH: You've been interviewed a lot about this.

JK: Not a great deal; that Dunn book. And I am supposedly going to be in a scene in this documentary that is being done about Sidney and his family. Oh, yeah, that was interesting, the fact that he and his wife have been honored by a Catholic university for their work educating young people about the Holocaust. They've been given honorary doctorates by this Catholic university in Connecticut. And I was at the ceremony. It was really very impressive.

MH: What should I ask Sidney?

JK: His clearer recollections— (laughs)

MH: Of the meeting?

JK: Of the meeting, yes. As a matter of fact, he tells me that it was on my advice that he didn't rush out of Dachau and waited until some assistance was available. Now, I don't remember that clearly. I think I was too horrified by the whole thing.

MH: After Dachau, did you have any more fighting to do, or was it over?

JK: Well, it was pretty much over. I witnessed some very unpleasant things that you may not want to document. We very rapidly proceeded into the rest of Germany. At one point, I witnessed elderly people—mostly men—and children, coming out of the woods waving white handkerchiefs, and our soldiers mowed them down.

MH: Really?

JK: Yeah, and picked over the bodies. It was pretty horrifying. These are things that you don't hear about. War is a hideous thing; it makes people the worst kind of animals. I mean, things that—

MH: I've been in a war, and I understand what you're saying. I can't tell you how many of the men I've interviewed talk about—well, first after Malmédy and then after seeing concentration camps, agreeing they'd take no prisoners, especially if they ran into SS. If you're SS? (makes popping sound)

JK: Yeah.

MH: Gone. But agreeing institutionally, “We’re not taking prisoners.” I’ve talked to people who came across death marches with SS there, and the SS would see them coming and they’d run. And sometimes the SS would stop, throw down their weapons and put up their arms, and they’d mow them down. And if you raise the matter of the Geneva Convention, they look at you as though you’re some kind of mental defective.

JK: Incidentally, I discovered subsequently that I was right in my assessment of whether we had any right to just kill people randomly that way, because I subsequently met some very compassionate Germans. I met two young Jewish sisters—young; they probably were in their thirties—who lived in the heart of Munich throughout the war, protected by their neighbors, who didn’t give them away. And there were other people like that. I’m sure that doctor that gave me that camera was not a murderer. I mean, there were a lot of compassionate people. Unfortunately, there were the herds, just as there are here in America, who follow the worst course. Probably then there were more in Germany, because of the terrible circumstances that we bound them into after the First World War.

MH: When you saw that incident where they were mowing down these people, were you able to say anything, do anything?

JK: I screamed, and it didn’t help. By that time, the damage had been done, anyway.

MH: That sounds—

JK: But then, subsequently, watching them pick over the bodies was pretty grim. I have—

MH: That had to be in the last week of the war, the last couple days.

JK: It was; it was. It was almost over. And I have a friend down in Florida who boasts about all of the watches and jewelry that he picked off German bodies—and, to this day, sees nothing wrong in it.

MH: Anything else?

JK: That’s not enough? (laughs)

MH: I keep saying “Anything else?” and I get more, so I’ll keep saying “Anything else?” until you say, “No, that’s it.”

JK: I’m trying to remember anything else.

*End of interview*