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Orville Larson oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Orville Larson (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. First of all, could you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

Orville Larson: Oh, who are you?

MH: Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Michael Hirsh. I'm an author, I live in Florida. I'm writing a book that will be published by Bantam Dell, a division of Random House, in early 2010. The working title is *The Last Liberators: America's Final Witness to the Holocaust*.

OH: Yeah.

MH: And I actually got your name—I believe I got it from Beth Eberhardt, who's the daughter of an 11th Armored man who's deceased. So, what I'd like to do is interview you over the phone.

OH: Yeah. There's not many of us left anymore.

MH: I know it. That's why I'm tracking you guys down. So, if it's okay, could you give me your name and address?

OL: Orville Larson....

MH: And Larson is L-a-r-s-o-n?

OL: Yeah, right.

MH: And your phone number is.... What's your date of birth?

OL: 10-31-18 [October 31, 1918].

MH: So, how old are you today?

OL: Well, I'm eighty-nine.

MH: Eighty-nine. And you were with the 11th Armored Division at Mauthausen and Gusen.

OL: Yeah.

MH: Where were you before the Army?

OL: Well, I was workin' in California.

MH: Whereabouts?

OL: I worked in San Diego, building bombers.

MH: Building bombers?

OH: Yeah. (inaudible)

MH: At where?

OL: B-24s.

MH: And so you got drafted, or you enlisted?

OL: Well—oh, yeah, I got drafted in—well, I was in the first draft they had, but they turned me down physically. So, then I was put in 4-F and I worked in the lumberyard for a while. And then I had some friends that came to San Diego—wages were better, weather was better and all that, so I went to school and learned about bombers and airplanes, came out and got a job at Consolidated [Aircraft], and worked in B-24s until June of forty-four [1944] when they drafted me, finally.

MH: In June of forty-four [1944]. And where'd they send you?

OL: Well, I went to Camp Fannin in Texas.

MH: And what—were you—after basic, did you immediately get put in the 11th Armored, or were you sent over—

OL: Yeah. See, when we got out of Camp Fannin, we had to go to Baltimore, or Boston, and shipped out. And when I got into Europe in the replacement center, why, then I got put in the 11th Armored.

MH: So, where'd you join the 11th Armored?

OL: That's when the Battle of Bastogne just ended.

MH: And you were a replacement going in.

OL: Yeah.

MH: That had to be a scary time.

(both laugh)

OL: Yeah. In a lot of ways, yeah.

MH: What was your first combat experience?

OL: Well, we'd taken villages, hills, anywhere where there was a defense. That was in about middle of January, later part of January of forty-five [1945].

MH: And what was that experience like for you?

OL: Well, the first one was, we took the Siegfried Lines near Saint-Vith, just south of Saint-Vith, Germany [*sic*]. It was on the edge of France or Germany.¹ But anyhow, like about two o'clock in the morning, we went dis-armored. And we never did that, you know.

MH: What does that mean?

OL: That means you walked. In an armored division, you ride, and you're in armored vehicles. But everybody took rifles and grenades and one ration, one day's ration—you know, a K ration—and we took off about two o'clock in the morning. And it was cold and dark and a lot of snow.

MH: Why'd they have you do that instead of stay on the tanks?

OL: Well, it was surprise raid for the concentration camp, or for the pillboxes. There were a lot of pillboxes, and by about daylight, we took about two miles of pillboxes. We went in abreast, spread out. And it was a pretty good deal, 'cause there were a lot of mines—we lost more people stepping on mines than we did fire power. We caught a lot of 'em back having breakfast. So we got dug in between pillboxes, about daybreak, and of course we were digging fast, 'cause that was kinda frozen, rocky soil. And we got again

¹ Saint-Vith is actually located in Belgium.

—pretty soon they come back, marching back after breakfast. We figured they'd been out for breakfast and come back behind the lines.

Well, we soon annihilated them because the artilleries just opened up, just enormous; but we stayed there two or three days just holding it. And kinda got surrounded to start with, but we finally got liberated. And didn't have much food, either. Didn't know it for the first day. But that's the way it was in the Army. But anyhow, so after about two or three days, we just held it and some other division came in and relieved us, and then we went back behind the lines and went south about, oh, twenty-eight, thirty miles or so. We traveled at night. And then we were doing guard duty along the Siegfried Line down there, that's right west of Prüm, Germany, on the Our River.

MH: On which river?

OL: Our, O-u-r.

MH: O-u-r, okay.

OL: So we were—it was night, and we were duty along the river to keep any Germans from crossing, and then every other night we'd be back in a little village, just doing guard duty in the valleys and stuff like that to keep 'em from coming across. And so one morning, before daylight—it was dark out—I was down there in a little valley on a machine gun, and I heard a noise like I'd never heard before. I didn't know if the Germans were coming after us, or we were going after them. But soon as it got daylight, it was foggy. And I saw the fog coming in.

Well, pretty soon I could hear armored division moving forward, happened to be our battalion was in reserve. Boy, that was a good thing. And the other two battalions were making a raid through the Siegfried Line. Soon as it got light out, I could see the tanks and the artillery and everything moving forward, and so they crossed the line. We didn't have to do it that time. So, we were in reserve until the next morning, then we got in our vehicles and we followed. We stopped about six or eight miles west of Prüm before the night. And artillery just annihilated the forest, just nothing left but stumps. But we dug in and a lot of snow. Shelby was a good friend of mine, he was—Shelby from Kentucky—and we made a hole and put brush over the top of it.

MH: Are you talking about Shelby Keeton²?

² Shelby Keeton was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00066.

OL: Yeah. How'd you get in contact with him?

MH: I talked to him the other day.

OL: Oh, yeah, he's still alive. He'll be ninety September 6.

MH: September 8.

OL: September 8, oh. Anyhow, he wanted me to come for his birthday, but I don't think I can make it. But anyhow, we made—my kitchen came up and give us some food. We had some empty cans, so we tried to make a fireplace, you know a little stove. It was smoky and we couldn't stand the smoke, and it was so cold you couldn't stand it if you didn't have a smoke. So we'd light it, and we'd put it out. So we spent the night like that. But the next day, we went into Prüm. And then we were put in the point. We'd been in reserve. So, then we went—we led on into Germany and you'd have a scrap there where a village would come, or wherever they had a defense. You'd either spread out, or—you didn't know what you were going to do, depends on the situation. But it was every man for himself, but you worked together.

MH: Could I put you on hold for one second?

OL: Yeah.

MH: I'm sorry, just hang on.

(switches phones) Michael Hirsh.

Andrea Bivins: Hi, it's Andrea Bivins.

MH: Hi.

AB: How are you?

MH: Okay.

AB: Are you busy?

MH: Yeah, can I call you back?

AB: Yup.

MH: Okay bye.

AB: Bye.

MH: (switches phones) I'm sorry.

OL: Okay. But anyhow, that's the way it went all the way across Europe. Finally we got to the Rhine River. Funny things happened as you were going through. Like when you get to—one town we got to, we lost a lot of men in tanks and half-tracks and that sort of thing. It was about one o'clock in the morning, and the town had kind of settled. So, we got in and was trying to find a house to get in and had a first lieutenant, our platoon sergeant, and so we got down in that house. We figured there'd be a raid on us, but we didn't know.

So we chased all the people down in the basement—normally we'd just chase 'em out. But it was cold and mostly older people, some younger people. There was four girls in the group. And I'd found a chicken, and Shelby'd found some potatoes. If we had those two, we could boil 'em together and have potato soup. Well, at that time it was about one in the morning, and one of the guys says, "Let's get those four girls to make the soup." So, went down in the basement and brought those four girls up. They thought they were going to be nice to the soldiers, but when we told them what we wanted them to do, they said, "Oh, *ja, ja*." They could talk about as much English as we could talk German. And so boy, they made the soup, and we asked them to eat with us and they were the friendliest girls.

And about the time we got our soup eaten, they had a raid on us, and boy, them girls hit the basement and we defended the area. Well, they didn't raid our house—about two or three houses up from us, a lot of ammunition. Some guys there got killed and they killed

a bunch of Germans. But those were the funny things that happened, going through towns, you know.

Well, finally we got to Würms, that was—well, it was in the spring, right on the Rhine River. [General George S.] Patton had two armored divisions trying to take Würms. They had a big bridge there, and we wanted that bridge. We got within oh, a mile or two of the town and we saw that bridge go up in the air. We had P-47s helping us; we always did that when we had trouble. But we just stopped and went back to a little village. We just went around it, we didn't go through it, but there weren't any soldiers in there, just all the people of the town. They went out in the straw pile and stayed—it wasn't very big, about ten houses or so.

So, we stayed there at night, and then the next day, why, we were cleaning out Würms. Hardly any Germans left anyhow. But our company had to go down and take the airfield. Oh, there was a few people around, not many. So we stayed in that area, oh, a couple of days. And then we crossed the Rhine and went again—when you're in armored division, you don't get no breaks. They just had us goin'. Finally, we got into Czechoslovakia near Plzeň and we changed south from Plzeň, and that's when we went down into Austria and on the day the war was over, we found those concentration camps at Mauthausen.

MH: Tell me how you first knew they were there?

OL: Well, we didn't—in our company, we didn't even know they were there. See, in an armored division, you have what's called the cavalry. And it's the cavalry's job—it's a dangerous job, they've got to scoot all over to find troubles. And they sent some vehicles out around the town of St. George, and they found the camp of Gusen II. We didn't even know it was out there before. People don't tell you nothing sometimes, you know. And so they found that one, and there they told them about Mauthausen, so then they got permission to go down to Mauthausen. It was not a fighting group; it was just a piercing group. And they got in there, and all the guards had left. So they just found it, on the fifth of May, and then they just told the people, "Well, you're going to have to take care of yourself until tomorrow," and they got orders to come back to the company, the battalion area. I think it was on the sixth of May we went in and got that organized, and separated all the relations. The different nationalities fought each other in the camp.

MH: First of all, did you know anything about these camps before they found Gusen II?

OL: We'd just heard about it. We didn't know they were there. But I tell you, they was a fighting people. They'd fight the Hungarians, they'd fight the Romanians and the French, and everybody else.

MH: In the camps?

OL: Right in Mauthausen main camp.

MH: So, when did you personally get to Mauthausen main camp?

OL: It was on the sixth of May. The day after the war was over.

MH: The day before the war was over.

OL: No, after. Our cavalry found it the day the war was over. See, the cavalry—

MH: Armistice was signed on the eighth.

OL: Oh, yeah, but we were taken—the war wasn't over until about fifteenth. There were skirmishes going on.

MH: So, when you first went in—you went into Mauthausen, right?

OL: Oh, yeah.

MH: Tell me about that. Did you ride the tank in or walk in?

OL: Oh, yeah, we rode in.

MH: The gates were open. And you ride in, and what do you see?

OL: Oh, dead people all over, piles of them. There were piles of them. It was a mess.

MH: So, how do you deal with that?

OL: Well, we couldn't do nothing 'cause nothing was ordered, so we all got out. And there were some duplexes about two, three blocks away, two or three streets. That's where the guards lived, and we walked down and got settled. And then they tried to get organized, and the battalion headquarters, they took over—charge—of the camp. And then we were all assigned jobs from then on, and they started finding out—they went down and got the civilians, in the town of Mauthausen, and they had to come up and drag all the people out and bury 'em. Our engineers blew the trench open and bulldozer pushed a lot of dirt, but they had to finish shoveling it. And they made the civilians do all the burying.

MH: And what was your job?

OL: I was just a guard. As long as I was there, just kind of a guard around, that's all.

MH: So, did—were you able to talk to the people who'd been prisoners there?

OL: Oh, yeah.

MH: They spoke English, or you spoke—

OL: Some of 'em did, yeah.

MH: Tell me about the conversations.

OL: Well, like, there was one fella, he worked the laundry. I guess he was one of the bosses of the laundry. And when he was younger, he worked in Wyoming. They went back to Germany. So he talked English real well, and he was captured—I dunno, he was in Austria or somewhere. But he got a job and he was treated pretty nice, 'cause he wasn't skinny and he had enough to eat. But a lot of them, the Polish people, they were perfectly healthy and everything like that, because they hadn't been there for very long. But I don't know why they was all put in there, especially a lot of young people, a lot of young women. And a lot of them were just as friendly as could be. And what we had separated the barracks and everything, as soon as they could they started sending people back to their country, 'cause we had to get rid of 'em. 'Cause, you know, it cost a lot of money to feed them.

MH: How did they send them back to their country?

OL: Put 'em in trucks.

MH: GI trucks?

OL: Oh, yeah.

MH: And you were driving them back?

OL: Oh yeah, the GIs drove them back. And if the trains were running, they could just put 'em on trains; like when the Italians went home, they had to put them on trucks to send them through Switzerland, and then across the mountains to Italy.

MH: How long did it take before you started emptying the camp?

OL: Oh, a week, I suppose, or two. We had it organized. Well, it took a long time to get a bunch of trucks up there, too, because the transportation had to find the ways to do it.

MH: What about the people who weren't in any shape to travel?

OL: If they were in shape to travel, we'd send 'em home.

MH: But the ones who weren't?

OL: Then they send the real bad ones to area hospitals. And then the 90 and 91st Army, I think it was a field hospital came up, they put big tents out there in the field and they put people in there, doctors and nurses.

MH: Did any of the inmates talk to you about what the Germans had done to them?

OL: Not too much. Oh, you know, they'd been beaten up and starved, and they had to work. See, there was rock quarries all over that area. And they had to work in rock quarries, and that—they worked them to death, is what they did.

MH: You saw the quarries?

OL: Oh, yeah.

MH: What'd they look like?

OL: Like a pit, like—oh, well like an open copper mine, you know, except they took rocks out of there. They cut 'em up into pieces, like building rocks.

MH: That was one of the quarries where they had the big number of steps that they made people climb up and down?

OL: Yeah. They didn't have any mechanical equipment, they carried them. And boy, those rocks were heavy. They were blocks, you know.

MH: So the people told you about that?

OL: Oh, yeah.

MH: How do you deal with what you're seeing? I mean, you come into a place and there's stacks and stacks of bodies, of people—

OL: You'd seen a lot of bad things by the time you get there, and that's just another one. It didn't affect me. Oh, some guys, they really got shook up about it. But you have to accept it.

MH: How did it make you feel about the Germans?

OL: Well, it didn't make you feel that better about it. Of course, the average German over there didn't like the war any better than we did. But the hierarchy, or the kingpin for the

job, forced them to do that. And a lot of those civilians were so glad to be liberated, that they knew that rule was over for them. And a lot of the civilians were friendly, because they were so glad to have us come over and liberate them. 'Course, others would spit in your eyes if they could, 'cause they were regular Gestapo members, you know.

MH: Did you run into any SS?

OL: Oh yeah, we captured them all the time.

MH: Did you capture them or shoot 'em?

OL: Well, we used to capture them. If you were fighting, you shot 'em.

MH: A lot of the guys I talked to said that when they started talking to civilians in the area, the civilians routinely said, "We didn't know anything about the camp. We didn't know what—"

OL: Oh, yeah, they told us right there at the concentration camp in Mauthausen. "Well, we didn't know that's up there." Well, they were lying through their teeth, we knew that, but what can you say?

MH: How far away could you smell the camp?

OL: Well, within a half-mile of it.

MH: So how long did you actually stay at Mauthausen?

OL: Oh, probably a month and a half or two. I don't think we were there two months. All cleaned up and people set off, and it was nothing. And somebody came in and took over for us; I don't know who that was. And we left and went up in the Alps looking for the guards.

MH: Did you find them?

OL: Well, I'm not sure we found any of 'em, but story was around there was that they all fled up into the Alps Mountains. So, then we went into through the Alps in a town up there, kinda split into two small towns, but I don't—one day, I know one of the horse patrols go out. Civilians told 'em there was a camp way out somewhere, so about eight or ten guys volunteered to ride horses and they got a bunch of ammunition and stuff and went out. They found a cabin where they had been at one time, a truckload of ammunition, but nobody had been there for a while. They probably fled—see anybody fled in there would want to go to Spain. If they got to Spain, they're free. So, like prisoners. American prisoners, or any of 'em, if they could cross the mountains and get to Spain without getting caught, they were free. And I suppose the guards did the same thing. They found some of them, of course; they found them and put in prison, and most of them were killed.

MH: Were you one of the horseback guys?

OL: No, I didn't want to go out. I'd rode horses, but like guys from Wyoming, Texas and stuff like that that was used to riding horses. They took that problem.

MH: You've seen probably one of the worst things that you can imagine in the civilized world in a camp like that.

OL: Well, yeah.

MH: How does it affect your life?

OL: Well, it makes you think there's a lot of things that can be done, and I've always felt that we're sort of a diplomatic, democratic nation, and we have—everywhere we've had, we've tried to liberate some kind of—and make 'em a country like ours. That's what—everywhere we'd done, we've done that. But we sacrificed a lot of material lives and money. That's what they're doing over there in Iraq right now.

MH: Did seeing Mauthausen change your life at all?

OL: No, I don't think so. I wasn't going to let it.

MH: You also probably had an advantage in that you were older than most of the troops.

OL: Yeah, right. Some of them were a lot younger, that's a little different.

MH: I mean, I've talked to a lot of guys who were, like, eighteen and nineteen. And you were what, twenty-seven.

OL: Yeah, I was older.

MH: Any—do you know anybody else that I should be talking to?

OL: Well, there's a fellow from Wisconsin; he's a historian. He's a retired schoolteacher and he's a historian. I'd have to look up in the magazine and find his name now. But Shelby would know him; he's been to Shelby's house several times. You got Shelby's telephone number?

MH: Yeah, I know Shelby's phone number.

OL: Shelby, he's a pretty good—the memory on him (inaudible)—

MH: All right. Well, I thank you very, very much. I sure appreciate it.

OL: Well, I suppose stories like that can make your book a little bit more entertaining.

MH: Well, at least it makes the book factual.

OL: Yeah.

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

OL: Yeah, I think I do.

MH: Um, is it possible—what I'd like is a photo of yourself then and a photo of yourself now, and if you can send them to me, I'll scan them and send them back to you.

OL: Okay, just a minute. I'll get a paper to write on.

MH: You don't use email, do you?

OL: Oh, no, I don't have that. Yeah, you can send me—let's see, I'd have to—

MH: Why don't I just send you—I'll send you an envelope.

OL: Oh, okay.

MH: And then, you can send them to me.

OL: Yeah, I have them (inaudible).

MH: Okay, if you can send me the originals so they're good copies and they—I'll scan them and I'll send them back to you. Okay, and your address is.... Okay, I will do that. Thank you very much for your time.

OL: Boy, the telephone, sounds like you're next door.

MH: Well, not quite. (laughs) Okay, thank you very much, sir.

OL: How long since you talked to Shelby?

MH: I talked to Shelby a week ago.

OL: I got to call him one of these days.

MH: Yeah I talked to him on the twentieth. Okay, thank you very much, sir.

OL: You know, Shelby, he was injured. Did he tell you about the half-track (inaudible)?

MH: No.

OL: Well, he's going through a fence. We were taking a town there, and the half-track hit the fence. We were out beside it. I got through the fence, but he was going through the fence and the half-track just hit the fence, and he got caught in the fence and drug him a ways. Boy, it injured his leg and his arm, his shoulder. Well, what could we do with him? I whittled a crutch out of a branch; he used that for a while trying to get around.

MH: And they didn't send him back?

OL: No. He wasn't bad enough for that.

MH: So, meanwhile, he's hopping around on a homemade crutch.

OL: He's drawing compensation now from the injuries from that, but with his age it got bad.

MH: He didn't tell me that story. Thank you.

OL: You ask him if he still got the crutch that he used that I made for him.

MH: Will do. Thank you very much, sir.

OL: Yeah, okay.

MH: Okay, bye-bye.

End of interview