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# Phyllis Law oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 30, 2008

Phyllis Lamont Law (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.]

**Phyllis Law:** Okay, Mike.

**Michael Hirsh:** Okay, just so I have it correctly, your name is Phyllis, P-h-y-l-l-i-s, Law, L-a-w?

PL: P-h-y-l-l-i-s.

MH: Okay. And you're at....

PL: That's right.

MH: And your phone number is.... And your name at the time of World War II was Phyllis Lamont, L-a-m-o-n-t.

PL: Right.

MH: Can you give me your birth date?

PL: 7-5-22 [July 5, 1922].

MH: How did it happen that you went into the Army?

PL: Well, I was just out of nurse's training, and I wanted to get some experience, excitement, you know.

MH: How old were you at the time?

PL: Oh, about twenty.

MH: And you figured going to war was about the most excitement you could have?

PL: Yeah, I just had to get away from where I'd been for the last two years, you know, working hard. And now I wanted out of it.

MH: Where did you grow up?

PL: Oh, I grew up down here in Leroy.

MH: Leroy, Pennsylvania?

PL: Pennsylvania, ten miles from here.

MH: And where'd you go to nursing school?

PL: I went to nurse's school in Newburgh, New York, on the Hudson.

MH: What school was that?

PL: St. Luke's.

MH: So, you come out of St. Luke's, and you're a registered nurse.

PL: Yes, and I went into the service under the Red Cross.

MH: What does that mean?

PL: Oh, it means that you don't enlist like, you know, like the men do. I had to get permission from the hospital where I was to enter the service with the Red Cross, and that's how I got my okay to get in the service.

MH: And when you go in, are you in there as a lieutenant?

PL: Yes, second lieutenant.

MH: Second lieutenant. So, they send you through basic training.

PL: Yes. Well, from there—let's see, I had my exam in New York City, and from there I was sent to Atlantic City to get my basic and all my shots [at Basic Training Center No. 7], and then from there I was assigned to Tilton General Hospital [at Fort Dix].

MH: Which is where?

PL: In Trenton, New Jersey. And I worked there under—with regular nursing care.

MH: At what point do they tell you you're going overseas?

PL: Well, while we were working on the ward, a lot of them are talking about going overseas, and that meant more excitement for a twenty-year-old. So, I signed up. The next thing I know, they'd sent me to South Carolina.

MH: And you're attached to—

PL: I went down there to Fort Jackson, and then I was attached to the 131<sup>st</sup> [Evacuation Hospital] from there.

MH: What was it like when you finally got orders that you're going to get on a ship and go over there?

PL: Well, that was all right, until I got on the ship. (laughs)

MH: Tell me about that.

PL: We were assigned down in Fort Jackson, and we came back to Trenton, and then we were sent to New York City to get on this ship. And it was midnight or so when we got on—it was Christmastime, that wasn't so good—and we just had to climb up to this big ship in the dark, with all our packs and stuff. And then we were just assigned to the staterooms and picked our bunk, and there we sat for three days and nights.

MH: With the ship not moving?

PL: Oh, no, the ship moved. It was on its way, zigzagging its way across the Atlantic.

MH: But that took you longer than three days.

PL: No.

MH: You guys made it across the Atlantic in three days?

PL: The *Queen Elizabeth*, thirty knots, and zigzagged all the way over; and keep our clothes on, because they said we were being followed by a wolf pack of submarines. So, we got to England, or Greenock, Scotland, and it was just before Christmas. It was cold and snowing, and we were assigned to big old houses that had nothing in them but a fireplace and straw mattresses and bunks. And, I don't know, we just complained all while we were there, but we got along.

MH: But that's what people in the Army do.

PL: Yeah. And we got along. Anyway, it was cold. We kept throwing straw and mothballs into the fire to get warm. And then, let's see. Oh, it came Christmas night or Christmas Eve, and it was Christmas, and all the Catholic girls could go to mass. The Protestant girls had nothing, we couldn't go anywhere: we were still under quarantine. So, we all went to mass; we were all Catholic. It was snowing, it was cold and snowing. Yeah.

MH: How did the English people react to you guys?

PL: Oh, they reacted all right when they saw us. We got invited out to different homes after we'd been there for a while. And three of us were non-drinkers, of course, and we were invited to a home and we expected tea in rations, but they liked gin and tonic.

MH: You were non-drinkers because of your age?

PL: Just weren't—we weren't drinkers.

MH: You didn't drink?

PL: Just not drinkers. I was known as an orange juice girl all the way through the service. And the other girls, I don't know; after I left them, I don't know.

MH: Okay. So, how—yeah, go ahead.

PL: Well, like I say. We tried the gin and tonic, and all three of us conked out. Finally we—that was before we had anything to eat. And after we'd eaten, we kinda napped in our chairs. And I don't remember what we did at leaving, but anyway, we went back to our quarters. From there, we were put on detached service.

MH: How soon after that did they send you across the Channel?

PL: Oh, dear. We got there at Christmas and we went across the Channel in March, I think it was March. In the meantime, we had been on detached service.

MH: So, that meant you were doing what?

PL: We were working with other outfits in different areas; some of us were down toward Chester, and I don't know where the others went.

MH: Tell me about going across the Channel—what was that trip like?

PL: I don't remember going across the Channel; we went across on the [MS] *Sobieski*, that's all I know.

MH: The *Sobieski*?

PL: Yeah.

MH: Big ship?

PL: No, no, a small one.

MH: And you went to where?

PL: Let's see, where did we land?

MH: Was it Le Havre?

PL: No, I don't think we landed in Le Havre; I think we landed in Caen or something like that? Or Rouen, R-o-u-e-n, does that sound like anything?

MH: I can look it up.

PL: Something like that. I think it was Rouen.

MH: So, at this point, there's forty nurses more or less.

PL: Yeah.

MH: And you're part of the 131<sup>st</sup> Evac. Did they attach you to an infantry unit?

PL: Oh no, no. We weren't attached to anybody. We went from Rouen to Paris by train.

MH: Were you in passenger cars or boxcars, 40-by-8s?

PL: (laughs) Well, let's see if I can remember. That's a long time ago.

MH: Yes, it is.

PL: We were in several different things. I think we went in a truck. Took care of us. And we stopped there long enough to eat and they put us on a—I don't know, I think we just went by truck to Reims, as I recall. We were stationed in chateaux there in Reims and set up our outfit in an old boys' school, a big fort-like. That was an experience, too.

MH: Because—?

PL: The facilities weren't so good.

MH: Were you taking care of wounded by then?

PL: No, there was nobody there. This was just a trial. We set up a trial of the outfit, and if I recall, it took us a while to get our supplies, so we were just there for a short time.

MH: When's the first time you came into contact with the troops who needed your care?

PL: First time we came in contact with them was, let's see, in Germany, Bierbach or something like that, in Germany.

MH: What was the experience like, if you recall?

PL: We were just with them there, and then—that was later. Let me think now. One place we were set up—the only place we were ever in contact with them and took care of wounded was in Germany, but I can't remember where it was. I worked in a recovery ward; we just set up in tents and lived out in the country.

MH: So, it's pretty much like being in a M.A.S.H. unit.

PL: Yeah.

MH: How did you—what was the first time you knew about concentration camps?

PL: Oh, we went from taking care of these wounded, we were taken to—that's when we landed in Bierbach, by truck; all of our travel was by truck, covered truck. We never saw the countryside at all. We were inside covered trucks because of snipers or whatnot, they told us. And outside of Mauthausen, in the Linz area, we were left in a field for a few days until the boys went into the concentration camp. Our colonel wouldn't let us go, too, until the boys had gone in to see what it was all about. And from there, they took us into the camp.

MH: What were you—what was it like waiting for those few days?

PL: Basking in the sunshine and just waitin' around. We lived in little tents.

MH: But there was no sense of imminent dread as to what you were going to be exposed to?

PL: No, no, no. Of course, we really had no idea, you know.

MH: Nobody had told you what these camps were?

PL: No. Well, they told us they were there, but you know, you don't really know until you get into it and see it, really.

MH: So, tell me about the first time you went there.

PL: Hmm. Well, the first time we went there, we drove into camp in covered trucks, as usual, and we jumped off trucks.

MH: This was into Gusen?

PL: Into Gusen, Gusen I. And of course, me, I broke a toe or something, so I couldn't hobble around too well, and I didn't work for a while. But I did get into camp, and we were all dosed down with DDT and taken into the wards.

MH: How do they put the DDT on you?

PL: (laughs) Squirt guns.

MH: Oh, the big flip guns with the pump handle?

PL: I don't remember about the handle. Just like you spray insect stuff. Opened up all the things in your—what do you call them, fatigues?—and we were dosed really good before we went in. Because they said there was typhus and all kinds of things there.

MH: So, you were living—you were living in a tent in—

PL: No, we didn't live in a tent there. We lived in officers' quarters—they were little houses away from the camp—when they took us up there. Like three or four of us in a room, real close quarters, but at least it was clean. We had a place to take a shower and whatnot.

MH: How far away from the actual camp where the inmates were, were those officers' quarters?

PL: Oh, boy. I don't know, maybe five miles.

MH: Oh, so it was quite a ways away.

PL: Possibly. Yeah.

MH: So what do you remember about the first time they actually took you into the camps?

PL: Well, they dosed us down and let us in, and we had to make up a lot of supplies first. And what we saw were all these horrible, horrible people in bunks that were five and ten across, and every one of them emaciated and no clothes or few clothes or dirty clothes and whatnot. And they all had diarrhea and all kinds of sickness, so what we had to do was just pass pills at first. Some of the boys had set up intravenous and blood and so forth, which they put them in, everybody as they went along. Before they got through, some of them were dead before they were completed.

MH: How do you deal with that?

PL: Oh, I don't know how you deal with it. You feel bad. That's about all you can do, it's kind of a shock.

MH: I mean, you were what, a twenty-year-old girl who had never been exposed to anything like this.

PL: Well, except at the hospital; you know, you have people die on you at the hospital. But you had all kinds of things to take care of, and there it was just a matter of taking the people out and all the other—you didn't know when the next one was going to die. And all we did was pass pills, go along and ask everything—and of course everybody'd had diarrhea.

MH: What was the treatment for diarrhea back then?

PL: I think it was sulfa. Yeah. And they'd just give us a pack of pills and we'd just pass them out as we were told to. With a guard with us; we always had a guard with us.

MH: Were you able to talk to these people?

PL: No, I wasn't there really long enough to talk to any of them. Some of the other girls were there all the time. But like I say, I broke a toe, and so I was laid up for a while and couldn't get around.

MH: When you were passing pills, were you in the barracks where they had these—

PL: Yes, yes, right in the barracks. We just had a little area in the front of the ward where we had our supplies. And we just—from there, the guard would go with us and we'd just take our pills out and pass them out, as everybody said they had diarrhea, in German or whatever it was.

MH: These were the barracks where they were laying on these plank beds?

PL: Right, right.

MH: I mean, the smell had to be overpowering, I assume.

PL: Yeah. You wear masks, but it still isn't the best.

MH: What do you think about the situation when you're in it?

PL: Kinda hopeless. You just hope you can save a few.

MH: Do you wonder about how this could happen or how people could do this to other people?

PL: Well, you know, you're so busy and everything—you know how it happened because they talk about it all the while you're there. And to see all the piles and piles of people that are outside, stacks of them, bones and that's about all. Watch them being thrown into a big hole in the ground. It's been quite a while, and I forget a lot of it.

MH: I understand. Are those images that stay with you all your life?

PL: Oh, yeah. If anybody mentions this to me, I know what they look like. Yeah, I hope it never happens to anybody again. But it has, of course. But I haven't been—it was kind of a shock, you know, when you're young.

MH: Did you write home about it?

PL: We weren't allowed to write home about it. We were allowed to write home, yes, but everything was censored.

MH: So, you couldn't tell your family what you'd seen.

PL: No, not until you get home. And then nobody wants to hear about it, anyway.

MH: Really?

PL: Yeah.

MH: Did you try talking about it?

PL: No, because my folks just weren't interested, you know; all they were interested in me, I got home. And they were farmers and went about their work and didn't have radios or anything like that to keep up with anything like that. That was my experience. My sister was a nurse, but she was also busy in a hospital; people hadn't—they don't think about it. They think about the war, sure, but they were more concerned with the war than what we'd been through.

MH: How long did you stay at Gusen?

PL: From May to July.

MH: So, you were there for quite some time.

PL: Well, yeah.

MH: Was there ever a point at which you actually felt you were doing some good here, we're saving lives?

PL: Yeah, because you saved a few. You know, you do the best you can. I know some of the girls got acquainted with some of the people. But I didn't, because I was back and forth. Everything seemed to happen: first it was the broken toe, and then I had tooth problems and I had to have my wisdom teeth out. And that took me out for a while. And then, before we left Gusen, we were invited to a party by the general or whoever it was. I never did meet him. And my three—two roommates that I had, we were all invited to this party. We didn't want to go, but we did. The jeep we went in had a drunken driver, and it was a rainy night, and we had to go from Gusen to Linz. I don't know how far it was, but it was on a real dark, miserable night with a drunken driver. And he said he had to keep up with two or three that was ahead of him, so we drove like crazy. And the next thing we knew, we were flying over an apple tree, over a bank, and we were smashed up. Out in the dark with nobody all the way from nowhere, you know.

MH: How'd they find you?

PL: Well, luckily, I was able to climb a bank and get up to the road, and luckily, one of the girls missed us and they sent a car back that found us. And that was the end of that. No more work, and we went home soon. I was on crutches and the others were, too, you know, for a while. So I really didn't do really much; I can't say I did very much, except in the beginning.

MH: Are you in touch with any of the nurses?

PL: All of them. We have about six now, on a round-robin, that are left.

MH: I interviewed Dorothy Maroon.<sup>1</sup>

PL: Dorothy's in Florida.

MH: She lives about forty-five minutes from where I live, so I went up to her place. Do you happen to have phone numbers for any of the others? Let me tell you the names that I have. Jeanette Hogland?

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<sup>1</sup> The DOI for Dorothy Maroon's interview is C65-00086.

PL: She's in—

MH: Palm Harbor, Florida, is what I have.

PL: She's in a nursing home. Just a minute, let me see if I'd got it.

MH: Okay, thank you.

PL: I don't know what I did with it, Mike.

MH: Let me tell you the other names I have, and you can tell me if I'm likely to find them. Ellen Marchese? Marcase?

PL: Marcase. Bonnie, yeah. She's in South Carolina.

MH: Okay, I have an address in Rutherford—

PL: Grey Court. Yeah, Rutherford. I don't have a phone for her.

MH: I just left a message for Jessie McIntyre.

PL: Jessie, she's in Chapel Hill.

MH: Thelma Brubaker?

PL: She's in Indiana, Pennsylvania, in some kind of a retirement home.

MH: And Mary Traub?

PL: Say that again.

MH: And Mary Traub? I guess her name was Mary Wood.

PL: Oh, Woodie.

MH: Woodie.

PL: I don't hear the girls sometimes with their names. Yeah, she's over in Webster.

MH: In New York.

PL: Yeah.

MH: But you don't have phone numbers on the Web.

PL: No, I don't, I don't. We write by round-robin, and I don't pay much attention to the phone. Jessie keeps up with all the phones, 'cause she likes the phones, and Dorothy does too, Dorothy Maroon. She's close by. She would have 'em all.

MH: She would have the phone numbers?

PL: I think so, you know, if they had any.

MH: All right. Just out of curiosity, tell me a little about your life when you came home, to the states.

PL: Well, we came back to the States to go to CBI, but the war was over, so we didn't have to go.

MH: CBI was—?

PL: China-Burma-India. That's what we came home for. But that was in August, and we didn't have to go.

MH: So, you got out of the service then?

PL: No, we all got assigned. A couple of us went to Texas, and some to Louisiana, and—

MH: Where'd you go?

PL: I went to McKinney, Texas.

MH: For how long?

PL: Oh, I left there in January of forty-six [1946].

MH: And got out of the service?

PL: And then I got out of the service, and Dorothy and I went to work in New York City at the Babies Hospital.

MH: You ultimately married?

PL: Well, I married a few years later, not right away. Dorothy and I went to Syracuse University and got our public health degree, and then we went our separate ways. I ended up in California after ten years of doing pediatric work in Syracuse, and I did public health in California.

MH: Where in California?

PL: San Jose. Let's see, I was there for a year, and I came back and did public health work in Green County, which is the Catskills, and then on up to (inaudible), where I met my husband and we got married.

MH: Do you have children?

PL: No, I haven't, no. Step-children, yeah.

MH: All right. Well, I thank you very, very much for your time.

PL: Well, you're welcome Mike. I wish I could tell you more, but I've forgotten a lot of it.

MH: You don't happen to have any pictures of yourself with the girls in the Army, do you?

PL: Oh, well, hit and miss. I've got a few left at our last reunion.

MH: Pictures that were taken in Europe?

PL: In Europe? No, no, I don't have any. Well, I have a few that the girls gave me that they took pictures of at Gusen. There's like a couple of us here and there that had our pictures taken.

MH: Do you have any of the pictures from Gusen?

PL: Yeah, all of us have pictures from Gusen. Just a few; we didn't have many.

MH: Pictures with you in them?

PL: No, no, no. We had a couple, like a couple of us had our pictures taken in front of the gate, something like that. And some of the girls may have other kinds. We did have pictures taken when we were in different areas waiting to go somewhere.

MH: Do you have the picture of yourself in front of the gate at Gusen?

PL: I and another girl, yes.

MH: Is it possible for me to get a copy of that?

PL: How would I get a copy? Let me think.

MH: I mean, I could—if you could send it to me, what I would do is digitally scan it and send it back to you. Would you want me to send you an envelope? Would that work?

PL: You better, with your address on it. That'd help.

MH: All right. Well, why don't I send you an envelope and you can send it to me, and I'll take care of it and send it back to you.

PL: Okay.

MH: Okay?

PL: Yeah. Dorothy might have one, too, but I don't know.

MH: She didn't have any. She had a picture of four of you that was in a newspaper, but she didn't have a print.

PL: Oh, yeah.

MH: I'll send you an envelope, and if you could send it to me, I'd appreciate it.

PL: Okay. If I find any others that you might be interested in, I'll see if I can get them.

MH: Okay. Do you have a picture of yourself today?

PL: Four, five years ago.

MH: Four, five years ago is good. I'll send you an envelope and you can send it back to me.

PL: Okay.

MH: Thank you very, very much for your time.

PL: You're welcome, Mike.

MH: I sure appreciate it. Bye.

PL: Bye.

*End of interview*