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# Arthur Leu oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 3, 2008

Arthur Leu (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:** Can you give me your full name and spell it for me please?

**Arthur Leu:** It's Arthur Leu, L-e-u.

MH: And your address?

MH: And your phone is....

AL: Correct.

MH: And you were with the 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and you got to Nordhausen?

AL: Yes.

MH: Where were you before the war?

AL: Where was I before the war?

MH: Right, this is a memory test now.

AL: (laughs) In Chicago, Illinois.

MH: Is that your hometown?

AL: Yes.

MH: Mine, too.

AL: Oh, for heaven sakes!

MH: Where'd you go to high school?

AL: I went to Lane.

MH: Oh, my God, I went to Roosevelt.

AL: Oh, Roosevelt's where I met my wife.

MH: Really?

AL: Yeah.

MH: When did she graduate?

AL: In 1943.

MH: Is she there?

AL: Yeah.

MH: Ask her if she remembers two teachers, Lavina Tinker and Nell Graham?

AL: (to Mrs. Leu) Do you remember two teachers, Lavina Tinker and Nell Graham?

**Mrs. Leu:** Graham.

AL: Graham.

MH: Yeah, she was the senior advisor; she was terrifying. I graduated in 1960.

AL: He said Graham was terrifying.

Mrs. Leu: Yes, she was.

AL: Mary agrees.

(all laugh)

MH: And—

Mrs. Leu: What was the other one?

AL: What was the other name?

MH: Lavina Tinker; she taught English and journalism.

AL: Lavina Tinker, English and journalism.

Mrs. Leu: No. I never heard of (inaudible).

AL: No, she doesn't really remember her. No.

MH: Oh, my God.

AL: Where did you live?

MH: When I was going to high school there, I lived at—on Francisco, near Montrose [Avenue].

AL: Francisco and Montrose. Okay, she lived down in Ridgeway (inaudible), north of Montrose.

MH: Oh, small world. And the fact that you went to Lane—I wrote Michael Schiavo's book about the Terri Schiavo case,<sup>1</sup> and one of the attorneys, who was an appellate attorney that I had gotten to know and we became good friends, a man named Jay Wilson, graduated from Lane.

AL: Oh, I see.

MH: And for his birthday, which was just last week, I found a place online where you could get t-shirts with, you know, the Lane Indian on it and the year he graduated, so I sent him one that said he was homecoming king.

AL: (laughs) Clever. Really clever.

MH: Anyhow, this comes under the heading of "small world."

AL: Yeah, it does.

MH: In any event, what were you doing in Chicago, before the war?

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<sup>1</sup> *Terri: The Truth*, published in 2006 by Dutton.

AL: I was a high school student.

MH: Okay, and then you got drafted right out of high school?

AL: I enlisted.

MH: Oh, and with the notion of what?

AL: Just helping out, clear up the mess that was occurring.

MH: When did you enlist?

AL: March of 1943.

MH: Okay. And you ended up in the 104<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] Division.

AL: Yes, as a replacement. I went overseas as a replacement.

MH: Do you remember when you went overseas?

AL: Yes, in August of 1943, September or August of forty-three [1943], right around the beginning of September.<sup>2</sup>

MH: Okay, before I forget—what's your date of birth?

AL: 1-6-25 [January 6, 1925].

MH: So you joined the 104<sup>th</sup> as a replacement?

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<sup>2</sup> According to the 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Veterans website (<http://www.104infdiv.org/>), the division arrived in France on September 7, 1944.

AL: Yes, I did.

MH: Were you an MP [Military Police] then?

AL: I had been—I was trained as an infantryman, and I went over as an infantryman and as a replacement, but I had been an MP in Fort Meade, Maryland for a short time; it was a period of time it seemed that they didn't know what to do with me. So, they put me in there. I had been an MP before I went overseas, yes.

MH: So, where did you join the division, do you remember?

AL: I joined the division in Aachen.

MH: And they made you an MP, or they stuck you with a rifle?

AL: They put me in with the MPs.

MH: Okay, what does an MP in a combat zone do?

AL: Well, our—we were an MP platoon of about 175 men, and we had three divisions: one guarded headquarters, one was traffic control, and one was the prisoner of war section. I was in the prison of war section.

MH: Do you remember the first time the unit took lots of prisoners?

AL: Well, by the time I got with 'em, we were in Aachen, and it was between Aachen and the Ruhr River and Eschweiler and Weisweiler. We started to pick up a tremendous number of prisoners in there.

MH: What do you do with them?

AL: (laughs) We were a forward compound; we simply took them right from the advance units and contained them. We had G-2 men, intelligence men who interviewed the prisoners—at least, the officers—to find out what they could from them. Then we

shipped them back to a rear compound. I never knew what happened to them after they left us, but we simply put them in—we never had them for more than twenty-four or thirty-six hours, I would guess. And then they were shipped back.

MH: When you say “shipped back,” I’ve been told by some other guys—not MPs—that when they got prisoners later in the war, they took their weapons away and simply pointed back and made them march by themselves.

AL: Well, that might have happened in a few cases. As we got further into Germany, we got into the area past Cologne, they came to us in the hundreds. And we did—we trucked them back; when I say shipped back, we trucked them back. But I don’t doubt there was a lot of cases up in the front lines where they just did exactly what you’ve heard: took their weapons and pointed them back. Frankly, they probably wound up with us.

MH: So, did you have to worry about feeding them and that sort of thing?

AL: We did feed them if they were kept—if it looked like we were keeping them any length of time. We kept them probably up to thirty-six hours, but sometimes they were out of there within eight or ten hours. But if they were with us over a long period of time, yes, we did feed them. We fed them our rations.

MH: What was their attitude toward you, or your attitude toward them, at that point in the war?

AL: (laughs) Let’s see. I guess they were—you could probably describe them as sullen. They were not happy with the way the war went, from what we could tell. And I think also they were probably glad to be out of it. As far as we were concerned, they were just somebody we had to get rid of. There was no great animosity there. They were Germans, they were Krauts. And we looked—as they came in, of course we watched to see if we could identify any of them having been in the SS.

MH: How do you do that?

AL: Mostly by uniform insignia, and they all did have a tattoo on their arm that signified they were part of the SS. If we could find that—sometimes we had so many we couldn’t do that kind of a search, but if we could find it that way, they were turned over to the officers from G-2 for interrogation.

MH: What'd you do, you forced them to take off their shirts?

AL: It was just on their arm, so you had no problem finding it.

MH: It was in the armpit, right?

AL: It was on the arm, right.

MH: And so they had to take off their shirts and show you?

AL: In some cases, but generally speaking, we did not do that. That was a luxury, when we had time.

MH: A luxury. I've been told—and I'll tell you something very frankly—I've been told by a surprising number of men that after they had seen the first camps, when they found SS, they didn't take them prisoner.

AL: Those are stories you're going to hear, and there's no question that I'm sure it happened. To the best of my knowledge, I never saw anything like that happen at Nordhausen.

MH: Tell me about getting to Nordhausen. Where was the division going at that point?

AL: You're going to challenge me, because I can tell you this: as a member of an MP platoon who were collecting, guarding and shipping back prisoners, we had little idea of where we were going. We had a job to do, and that was what we did. We were not involved in—you know, all I know is that we were heading in the general direction of Berlin.

MH: I understand that. I was a combat correspondent in Vietnam with the 25<sup>th</sup> Division. And we'd get on helicopters and they'd say, "You're going to war zone D," but basically we had no idea where we were.

AL: Yeah, well, you could get up in the air and see something. We're on the ground and just plodding along; we had no idea in that sense what the next town was, even. As individuals, that was not our function.

MH: Had anybody told you ahead of time about the concentration camps?

AL: Oh, of course we knew that they existed.

MH: A lot of guys said that they didn't know anything until they saw their first one.

AL: Oh, no. Well, I don't think any of us had any idea of how bad they were. What horrific—under what conditions those people existed. But sure, we knew it, we'd heard of concentration camps. People just talked about it. We knew that there was a slave labor situation and that they used prisoner for labor units. That much we knew.

MH: Okay. So tell me what you remember about coming to Nordhausen.

AL: Well, you know, we—the infantry units, of course, take those things first. We were right behind them at that point, because we were taking prisoners at such a rapid rate. We got to Nordhausen—as a matter of fact, I think when we got to Nordhausen, we were looking for a place to set up a compound. Because that's one thing we did: we found farmyards where there were enclosures. Those European farms had a lot of walled communities or homes where they had walls around their home and their barn area, so we looked for those kinds of places for the compounds, for prisoner compounds. And I think, as I remember, we were looking in that area. Then we came up to the Nordhausen compound there.

MH: Was this the one enclosed by barbed wire, or was this the one enclosed by the rock—you know—

AL: It was enclosed by a wire fence; whether it was barbed wire I can't tell you.

MH: Did you smell it first?

AL: It was bad. You could—it wasn't pleasant. When we—by the time we got there, the first units in, and I can't even tell you what infantry company that was in there, had

already started to bring bodies out. They started immediately looking for people who were alive. So, they had started to bring their bodies out and put them out into the open area out of the buildings. And, yes, there was a strong odor.

MH: Any idea, from memory, as to the quantity of bodies you're talking about?

AL: Oh, there were hundreds; I think probably thousands. But there were hundreds and hundreds of bodies.

MH: What goes through your mind when you see that at first?

AL: You can't believe it. You cannot absolutely believe that the human body can be that thin, that devoid of any substance. You can't believe that people could be treated like that, that another human being could exact that kind of punishment on another human.

MH: Do you become emotional?

AL: Oh, I think so. Yes, absolutely. You're horrified. You couldn't believe what you saw. Yeah. Sure you did.

MH: I mean do you have a physical reaction to this?

AL: No. A lot did. A lot did. I know what you're talking about. An awful lot did, yes. I didn't get seasick going overseas.

MH: So, you go into the camp through the wire?

AL: Yes, we went in through the gate, yes.

MH: And then what?

AL: Well, we just—it was more curiosity than anything, because they were already being—they were already searching for live bodies, and so we just went in and we had to see

what this was. And I think that's all it was; it was more curiosity than anything else, on our part.

MH: Do you remember seeing anybody alive?

AL: Oh, yes, absolutely.

MH: They came to you?

AL: No, no, they were being carried out—the ones I saw were being carried out on stretchers.

MH: Okay, men?

AL: And there were some of them sitting against the walls that had been brought out, that were obviously alive and barely so.

MH: All men, or men and women?

AL: Men and women.

MH: Really. Were you able to talk to any of them?

AL: No. I couldn't speak the language. I was not able to talk to any of them.

MH: Any sense as to who these people were? Whether they were Poles, Hungarians?

AL: No, no, absolutely no. On my part, it wasn't part of the equation; it was the horrific scene.

MH: They didn't have any insignia—they were wearing the striped uniforms?

AL: Uh, most of them were naked, frankly.

MH: Really, the live ones as well?

AL: Oh, yes. Yeah, I think—I dunno why they were. I can't tell you why they were, whether they tried to get rid of their filthy clothes or what, but there was a lack of clothing on them.

MH: Were medics in there trying to treat these people?

AL: Absolutely, yes.

MH: Do you remember at all what they were doing? Were they giving them IVs or—

AL: Well, they were specifically—I don't—they were treating people on the ground as best they could. There were not enough medics because nobody expected that kind of circumstance, that volume, you know.

MH: Did you—you didn't happen to see any of the tunnels where the V-2 [rocket] construction was going on, did you?

AL: No, I did not.

MH: What instructions did you get at this point from your CO [commanding officer]?

AL: They weren't even with us. We had a lieutenant with us; that was as far as we got. Our section had a first lieutenant, who was the leader of the section. He was the only one with us. So, we were given no instruction at all, as to the disposition or care of these people. That was not our function.

MH: How many guys were in your section at that point?

AL: We had about eighteen people in our section.

MH: So do you get into conversations with your fellow MPs?

AL: Now?

MH: No, then. I mean, are you able to talk about what you're seeing? Or is it just impossible to even talk about it?

AL: Oh, I think we—I'm sure that we each shared the shock with one another as we saw this, but other than that, there wasn't much discussion, I'm sure. There was no need for it. It was too visible, too obvious, except to wonder, why were those people there? They obviously were not combatants. But they didn't appear at least to be combatants. So, that question, of course, was on our minds.

MH: Did it impact the way you would treat German prisoners down the road?

AL: Did it make us disgusted, vilified, were we—I think that yeah, we probably consciously or otherwise were less tolerant. We didn't treat them badly. But we certainly wondered how they could be part of anything of what would allow what we saw to happen.

MH: All right, one question I've never asked anybody. When you were in the camp at that point, was it quiet? Was it noisy?

AL: It was very busy, but it was quiet. These people were hardly even capable of being noisy, their moaning or whatever it was. There was no shouting, there was no screaming, none of that going on.

MH: Just—

AL: I think they were just—I couldn't even know. But they must have been grateful that there was an activity there that was being of help to them, as opposed to what they were going through before.

MH: But they were in—I don't want to put words in your mouth. They were in too bad a shape to even express their gratitude.

AL: That I believe, for the most part. There were some obviously who, from what we understand, and I didn't see many of those, but there were some from what I understand who could talk to our people. But we didn't—I did not see any of them.

MH: Do you remember the weather that day?

AL: It was clear.

MH: So, how long did you actually spend there?

AL: Oh, I don't think I was there more than an hour, less than an hour.

MH: And then what?

AL: And then we just went on. We did set up a compound not too far away from there, and we just went on with what we were doing.

MH: Uh-huh. Where were you at the end of the war?

AL: Uh, we were in, just—oh, Lord, you made me go blank. Uh, ask me another question. I'll come back—oh, we were near Halle.

MH: Near Halle, okay.

AL: Near Halle, yeah. I'm sorry.

MH: Okay. I mean, I can—I have a book; I can track where the division was.

AL: Yeah, we were near Halle.

MH: Were you in one of those units that was told you were going to have to go to Japan?

AL: Oh, absolutely. At that point, after we met the Russians, from our standpoint, with the military police were doing—the section I was in, because we had been dealing with prisoners, we actually took over the city jail in Halle and we ran that jail for, I dunno, only about four weeks, three or four weeks. But we did do that. That's one of the—we had nothing else to do, because we weren't dealing with any great number of prisoners by that time. There were rear units who actually came up and took care of the mass prisoners that we had at that time.

MH: When did they send you back to the States?

AL: We came back, I believe it was—let's see, the war ended May 8. I think we must have come back July, end of June or July. We knew at that point we were going to go to be retrained.

MH: And then when did they discharge you?

AL: I was discharged in February of 1946. We had a thirty-two day leave. We went out to San Luis Obispo [California] where we were to be trained, and obviously, they deactivated the division. I was sent to Camp Cooke, reassigned to the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps, played ping-pong for a couple of weeks, as they had nothing for us to do. So they turned us loose again, and I hitchhiked from LA to Chicago.

MH: And you were discharged at that point.

AL: I was dis—yeah, I came home, went to work, and was on extended leave. I actually got a job and went to work, and then I got a telegram that told me to report for discharge.

MH: So what did you come back and do in Chicago?

AL: After the war?

MH: Yes.

AL: I went to the work for the Hearst Corporation, I went to work for—at that time it was the Chicago *Herald-Examiner*. I was in marketing and advertising. I stayed with Hearst for thirty-seven years, working for their magazine division for the last thirteen years.

MH: When you got back home, do you recall telling family and friends about what you had seen at Nordhausen?

AL: Not really. Uh, I don't think that there was any great amount of that, no big discussion on it.

MH: Was it something you were able to just push aside?

AL: You can't forget it. You can't forget it, no. But it was just part of what we did. It was not the whole.

MH: Right. And when did you leave Chicago?

AL: I retired in—well, I stayed there all the time. I retired in 1983 and left the Chicago area at that time and haven't been back since.

MH: Really? I'm actually going up there. I live in Florida now. I'm going up there August 5<sup>th</sup> to interview some people.

AL: Oh, we had a home on a lake in northern Wisconsin, and that's where we went when I retired. That was going to be our last move. We're on our fourth last-house now.

MH: Did you decide you didn't like winter that much?

AL: That got to be long, and we came down to Arkansas into a development community. We came down here in October out of the cold and snow area of Wisconsin, and played golf in shorts and thought, well, this is a different world.

MH: Right.

AL: So we stayed.

MH: Right, I can relate. And you're married and you have children?

AL: Yeah, we have three children: one boy, two girls.

MH: And grandkids?

AL: Oh, yeah. We got great-grandkids.

MH: How old are you right now?

AL: I'm eighty-three.

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

AL: I'm sure I have.

MH: If you have some time, you can dig out a photo of yourself from the war and a picture of yourself now. I'd like to have them and be able to use them.

AL: Let me get a piece of paper. Oh, hang on a minute.

MH: Do you have an e-mail address?

AL: Pardon me?

MH: Do you have email?

AL: Yeah. You want to—

MH: Why don't you just give me your email and I'll send you my info?

AL: ...

MH: Can you hold on just one second? (switches phone lines) Michael Hirsh.

**Unknown Woman:** Hi.

MH: Hi.

Unknown Woman: Let me give you this—

MH: Can you hang on one second? Let me call you right back.

Unknown Woman: Okay, bye.

MH: (switches phone lines) Hi, I'm sorry. Okay, I'll just send you the information, and I'll also send you the information about the book.

AL: All right, that's wonderful.

MH: And I have your current address, but if you decide to have another last-home, make sure you update me, because the publisher's going to send everybody I interview a copy of the book.

AL: (laughs) Okay, fine. I promise I'll do that.

MH: And if you think of anything else, for somebody who has no memory, let me tell you, you got a good memory.

AL: Well, I guess the prompting does help. But I'm just shocked at my memory of what happened during that period of time. I don't have a great deal of it.

MH: Do you know a man named Forrest Robinson?

AL: Oh, yes. Yeah, he'll be a great interview.

MH: The only problem is he's extremely deaf.

AL: Oh, he is terrible.

MH: And I just sent him an e-mail with essentially the same list of questions I asked you.

AL: And he's pretty good, I think; I think he'll answer you. He's got a better memory, either a better memory or a better imagination. I've often wondered about Forrest.  
(laughs)

MH: Do you remember any other people that I might be able to find?

AL: No, not that I—Glen knows more about that than I do.

MH: He's been looking and he thinks he's really tapped out, so—

AL: So many of us are gone, and frankly, of our people, the eighteen that I was very close to, why there are only one or two left. And they're getting pretty feeble. I'm lucky, I'm still in pretty good shape, but we're not doin' too well at this age. (laughs)

MH: Well, you know, that's one of the reasons I need to do the book now, and probably should have done it five years ago. I'm finding people. I've probably interviewed about fifty people by now.

AL: How you really—that's wonderful.

MH: Well, thank you very much. I sure appreciate your time.

AL: Have a good day.

MH: Okay, bye-bye.

AL: Bye.

*end of interview*