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## Sigmund Liberman oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Sigmund Liberman (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:** I need to repeat your name and address, because it didn't get recorded. It's Sigmund Liberman, L-i-b-e-r-m-a-n.... And ... and your birth date again, sir?

**Sigmund Liberman:** January 21, 1923.

MH: And you're with 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Timberwolves. You were with Company D of the 413<sup>th</sup> [Infantry Regiment], and you got to Nordhausen. So, you were in Alaska working for the Army.

SL: Working for the Army engineers.

MH: And you enlisted.

SL: I came out and enlisted in the Army.

MH: And when did you get to the 104<sup>th</sup>?

SL: Well, I went as an engineering cadet in ASTP at Fordham University in New York City, and they disbanded that after six or seven months and I joined the 104<sup>th</sup> at Camp Carson, Colorado.

MH: And at that point, what was your rank?

SL: Private.

MH: So, how long did you have at Camp Carson before they sent you overseas?

SL: Oh, I don't know, it must've been four or five months.

MH: I'm curious, did you think you were well-enough trained at that point to go into combat?

SL: Oh, yeah.

MH: You were pretty certain of it.

SL: Yeah.

MH: What was the trip like going to Europe?

SL: Seasick. (both laugh) And if you wanted an extra meal—they served two meals. If you wanted an extra meal, you served on the ship in some capacity, and I helped man a machine gun on the ship going over and had a third meal, but we were sick all the time. It was one night up on deck and one night down below.

MH: I'd think a third meal would not be an incentive under those conditions.

SL: No, it wasn't.

MH: What ship were you on?

SL: I forget the name; it was a German ship that they captured off Argentina.

MH: Passenger or cargo ship fitted out to haul troops?

SL: No, it was a German—

MH: An ocean liner?

SL: No, a German warship.

MH: Oh, okay. Where did you ultimately land?

SL: In Cherbourg, France.

MH: Okay, and then what?

SL: Then we went to Brest, France. We marched to Brest, B-r-e-s-t, on the coast, and we were so pooped, we had to stay there for about twenty-four hours before we could attack the town. And offshore was the island, the Guernsey Islands [*sic*],<sup>1</sup> and the Germans were out there, but we just left them there. We didn't go out there.

MH: Around what date was this?

SL: Oh, I don't remember, really.

MH: Do you remember the month? This was—

SL: It was forty—early forty-four [1944].

MH: Early forty-four [1944], okay. So, Brest was your first combat?

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the Channel Islands, of which Guernsey is but one.

SL: Yes.

MH: What do you remember of that experience?

SL: That we had sore feet marching there, and it was over real fast, as I remember.

MH: Did you react to combat the way you thought you would?

SL: Yes, because being a Jew fighting the Germans, I had a little bit more incentive, I think, than a lot of people.

MH: Which causes me to ask: at that point, what did you know about what the Germans were doing to the Jews?

SL: Well, we knew they were massacring them and sending them to death chambers.

MH: The reason I ask the question is so many of the GIs I've spoken with said they knew nothing until they came across one.

SL: Oh, yeah.

MH: They said the Army didn't tell them, and suddenly there they were.

SL: No, no, I knew all about it.

MH: Were you from a religious family?

SL: Fairly. I was a conservative Jew, and been raised and went to Sunday school, and I was bar mitzvahed.

MH: Where'd you grow up?

SL: In Seattle, Washington.

MH: In Seattle, okay. So after Brest, what happens?

SL: Well, then we went through France and into Belgium and Holland, and then into Germany.

MH: What battles were you in?

SL: Well, we were on the Rhine River in the battle of Cologne and the Battle of the Bulge, and the conquering of Holland. I remember in Holland, being in a motor squad, they had the canals, and we had to cover—I mean, we marched and advanced, and then there was a canal, which we could jump the first four or five, and then after that, we couldn't jump them anymore, so we went right in them and up the other side. I mean, we were too tired and wet and had bad feet. Then I got wounded afterwards to shrapnel on my foot, and frozen feet from Battle of the Bulge. I didn't have any change of socks or anything and we were out in the snow. I remember we were the furthest troops into Germany at the time from Bastogne [Belgium]; we were on the northern perimeter in the northern part of the line, and our secondary line that the Germans attacked us would've been thirty-five miles back. I remember that.

MH: That's hanging out there pretty much all by yourself.

SL: Yeah. In other words, it was a big "V," you might say, with Bastogne in the center, and we were at the northern limits, thirty-five miles in advance of Bastogne.

MH: Did you realize at the time what a risky position you were in?

SL: Oh, yeah. We saw the German tanks and the Germans below us heard them, and we had a German officer come across and wanted to exchange prisoners. He knew who we were, and we escorted him back to the CP [command post], and then we escorted him back over the river and he went into a warehouse, and I remember that we then opened up fire on the warehouse with mortars and artillery.

MH: I've never heard a story like that. How did the Germans make it known they want to talk?

SL: Well, they came across with a white flag.

MH: Like you see in the movies.

SL: Yeah.

MH: It was the German officer and others, or just one guy?

SL: An officer and one other man.

MH: He spoke English?

SL: Yes. He even knew our colonel's name.

MH: Really? That's a little unnerving.

SL: You ain't kidding. Well, you know they had—before that, in France and the early part of Germany—that they had Germans in American uniforms directing traffic the wrong way.

MH: I'd heard that story. Did you talk to this guy?

SL: Yes.

MH: What was the conversation like?

SL: Nothing. He just said he wanted to talk to our commanding officer.

MH: At that point, did you have German prisoners?

SL: No.

MH: So, do you think he was looking to exchange prisoners or see how you were—

SL: No, he really wanted to exchange, or wanted something in return for the men that he said he had.

MH: Do you know if he had Americans?

SL: Yes, he did.

MH: But you never got them.

SL: No.

MH: So, you opened fire on the warehouse. What river was that?

SL: That was the Ruhr.

MH: The Ruhr River. And then what happens?

SL: Well, then eventually, when Bastogne was done, we advanced and crossed the river. They had flooded—burst the dam above it and flooded the water down, but we crossed and kept on going.

MH: How did you cross?

SL: With pontoon boats.

MH: Those are with or without motor?

SL: Without.

MH: Without motors, does the division carry those or do they have to—

SL: No, the engineers have to come up with them.

MH: The engineers bring them up. Were you dressed for winter?

SL: No.

MH: How'd that happen?

SL: Well, we didn't even get combat boots until we were over there for a while. We wore the canvas—

MH: Leggings?

SL: Leggings.

MH: What kind of shoes?

SL: Just regular work shoes.

MH: You're kidding me. Obviously, you're not kidding me. I didn't realize they went over so ill-equipped. I knew there were people without winter clothes.

SL: No, we never had winter—we couldn't even change socks.

MH: How long did it take you to get boots?

SL: Well, we were over there about five or six months before we got combat boots.

MH: When you're moving, are you walking, riding trucks, Jeeps?

SL: Part of the time in Jeeps and part of the time walking.

MH: Did you ever pair up with a tank unit?

SL: Yes, toward the end of the war, we had a battalion of black—Afro-American tankers with us.

MH: What's it like riding on a tank? I look at the pictures and it seems the infantry guys are just really exposed.

SL: Oh, yeah, just hanging on.

MH: It beats walking.

SL: That's right. I mean, you're just as safe on there as walking, except if you're walking you might hit a mine or something. A lot of our men did hit shoe mines in Holland.

MH: After the Battle of the Bulge, what comes next?

SL: Then we went on into Cologne, across the Rhine at Remagen.

MH: You went over the famous bridge?

SL: We went over the second day. The engineers had already laid a pontoon bridge.

MH: Did you ever watch the engineers do that stuff?

SL: Yes. Oh, yeah.

MH: What's it like watching them?

SL: Nothing. Just build it by sections: you know, one by one, they bring them up and float them out and attach them to the other one.

MH: Were they doing this under fire?

SL: Partially under fire, with smokescreens on the other side to cover ourselves crossing.

MH: Somebody has to take a boat over to set those?

SL: Pardon?

MH: Somebody has to go over in a boat to set those, or do you—?

SL: There's a boat in the water to connect up and everything, yeah.

MH: The smokescreens, are they from artillery or mortars?

SL: Artillery and mortars.

MH: So you cross the Rhine, and now what?

SL: Then we fought our way—I forget the name of the river, but we met the Russian army.

MH: When did you come to Nordhausen?

SL: Oh, just before that. I think it was in April.

MH: Around the twenty-seventh, probably.

SL: Yes.

MH: So, just tell me about that experience. Did you know there was a camp there or more—?

SL: No, no, we captured Nordhausen, and the people there didn't even know there was a camp, but our intelligence says there was a camp where they were making rockets, and they had big tunnels where the rockets were being made and using Jews and slave labor to make these. When we opened up the gates, I guess I was allowed to go because I was Jewish, and that was one of the things they wanted me to see.

MH: Before you went in, are you traveling on main roads or dirt roads?

SL: No, dirt roads.

MH: Tell me what you see as you're coming toward the first camp?

SL: We saw the gates, big wooden gates and wires around them.

MH: Were the gates open already, the guards had gone?

SL: No. The guards had gone, yes, but we pushed the gates open. I mean, there was no lock.

MH: Could you see the people inside at that point?

SL: Oh, yeah, we walked—there were some of them still living and some of them stacked on the side. I don't know if you get *Life, World War II*, the book?

MH: I've seen it.

SL: There's pictures of it, at Nordhausen.

MH: This was one of the smaller camps around Nordhausen, right?

SL: Yes.

MH: So, they have you walk in. Are you with anybody else?

SL: Yes, other soldiers, an officer.

MH: What are you seeing? What are you thinking?

SL: Well, we saw some of them come up to us, and they looked like skeletons walking. You could see their ribs and everything, and we could see these stacks of dead people on either side, just stacks of them. And then we had the Germans in the city of Nordhausen come out and dig graves, and our aid people came in as fast as they could for those that were still living, to help them.

MH: You're going in what time of day: in the morning, afternoon?

SL: I believe it was early morning.

MH: And you go in and these people come up to you. Could they speak English?

SL: No.

MH: Were you able to communicate with them?

SL: A little bit. I understood Yiddish.

MH: Did you tell them you were Jewish?

SL: Yes.

MH: What's the reaction to that?

SL: Oh, they were surprised.

MH: You're in there, and did you go in any of the buildings, the barracks?

SL: Yes.

MH: What did you see in there?

SL: Nothing but stacks of barracks, tremendous foul odor and worn-out blankets and stuff like that.

MH: How is it that—what comes first, getting the local Germans to bury people or trying to get medical help for these folks?

SL: Well, at first we tried to get medical help, and of course, we didn't have that much there, and we had to send for more. And then—I mean, we left there and advanced on, so I didn't see all the medics come in, but I remember rounding up some of the Germans to come out there and start burying the dead.

MH: Talk about that experience. Your officer told you to get them?

SL: Yes.

MH: How far away was the town?

SL: Two miles.

MH: And you took a truck or a Jeep?

SL: Truck, I think. My Jeep. And the Germans that we could speak English didn't even know there was a camp there. That's what they told us.

MH: They couldn't smell it?

SL: They said there wasn't any.

MH: What'd you do, order them onto the truck?

SL: Yes. I mean, they herded them up and I think the division sent more trucks into town to get as many as we could to help out.

MH: You got men and women or just men?

SL: Men.

MH: Men. How were they dressed?

SL: The Germans?

MH: Yeah, the Germans. I've seen pictures at the other camps, and it looked like they were wearing suits and ties.

SL: No, no. No, they were regular work clothes.

MH: Did they bring their own shovels?

SL: Most of them, yes.

MH: Did they argue with you or try and fight you?

SL: No, no, they were worried we were going to kill them.

MH: Was there an inclination to do that?

SL: Well, I guess on my behalf. I was wanting to do something, but I never did.

MH: I've heard from other people that after they'd seen the camps, one guy said they didn't take prisoners. If they found SS, they were shot immediately.

SL: Well, we—I mean, there was instances that we had some SS junior troops up in a hill that were sniping at us, and they wouldn't surrender, so we just had the tanks and the mortars just blast the hill and killed them all. And in Holland at one time, we had two or three guys had their feet blown off by shoe mines, and we captured some Germans and asked them to go ahead of the line and go through the field, and the lieutenant wouldn't let them do that. He wanted them to go back, so a couple of the soldiers went back with them, and within twenty minutes, they came back and said that the Germans tried to escape.

MH: That took care of that.

SL: Yeah. We treated them pretty well.

MH: Actually, I had the date wrong. It would've been around April 11, because the Dora-Mittlebau camp, part of Nordhausen—

SL: Just a minute—I'm trying to find the date. We went into—Aachen was our first stop in Germany. And we went through the Iron Curtain, and it was called, at Nordhausen, was called the Mittelbau-Dora.

MH: Yeah, Mittelbau-Dora.

SL: Dora concentration camp.

MH: Right, that's where they had the underground rocket factories.

SL: Yeah. There was a crematorium there.

MH: Was it working when you got there?

SL: No.

MH: Did you go into any of the underground facilities?

SL: No.

MH: You bring these truckloads of German civilians back, and you just had to supervise what they were doing?

SL: I didn't, but some of the troops did.

MH: Tell me what you did after that.

SL: We went on.

MH: Ah, okay. Did you come to any other camps?

SL: No.

MH: Then the war ended about three weeks later or almost a month later.

SL: A month later.

MH: When did you come home to the U.S.?

SL: We stayed there for about two months, and then we came back to go to Camp Roberts, California, to train for the invasion of Japan.

MH: And then how long after that did you get out of the Army?

SL: We were there for about five, six months, then I got out. Went up to Fort Lewis and got discharged, and then I joined the Reserves. I went back to college. And then I joined the Reserves and got a commission as a second lieutenant and worked my way up to major in the infantry.

MH: When did you get out of the Reserves?

SL: In nineteen—oh, just during Vietnam, and [Robert] McNamara kicked 5,000 majors out in one day. We all had about eighteen years of active and reserve duty.

MH: And they wouldn't let you get to twenty?

SL: No.

MH: Nice. McNamara did a lot of wonderful things.

SL: Yeah, he was another [Donald] Rumsfeld.

MH: Yeah, that's for sure. I was with the 25<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] Division in Vietnam.

SL: I was supposed to go to Thailand and go across to Vietnam as a training officer before the war.

MH: That didn't happen?

SL: No. I was called up for Korea and was attached to the engineers, and I didn't know a damn thing about building roads, so that's when they sent me down to California to train for the Vietnam War.

MH: What did you do as a civilian?

SL: I had two department stores in Arizona with my father-in-law.

MH: You got your college degree?

SL: Yes.

MH: From where?

SL: From University of Washington, and then I went to graduate school in Arizona at the American Institute of Foreign Trade.

MH: When did you retire?

SL: From the Army?

MH: No, from the department stores.

SL: I moved to Texas in 1972, and I retired about five, six years ago.

MH: Did you find at any point your World War II experiences coming back to you?

SL: Well, I was commander of the Jewish War Veterans here in Dallas, which is one of the largest veterans' organizations, and we're the oldest in the U.S. We go to different schools and talk and give speeches. And I was interviewed by the Library of Congress and by the Holocaust Museum here. Being Jewish and being in the Army, people find out, and they do want me to talk about it, because there weren't too many Jews in the infantry.

MH: Do the memories of the war ever bother you?

SL: Once in a while I get nightmares, but not too often. There were some very ticklish spots that I remember. I mean, one time, we dug seven foxholes, advanced during the night. We were night fighters, and we kept going, and then we'd dig a foxhole, and then we'd have to go again, and it was just—you know, just a total mess. And we got real

tired. And then, another time, we were surrounded in a warehouse, and about ten of us, and they pushed me into a turnip—we had turnips stored there, so they covered me and a couple other guys in turnips, and then three of them surrendered to the Germans, and the Germans came in and started poking their bayonets into the turnips, but they never did hit us. And they felt—my men felt real good for me, because they knew if I was captured, it was a possibility of getting killed.

MH: Because you were Jewish.

SL: Yes.

MH: Were the other guys they buried in the turnips also Jewish?

SL: No, I was the only Jew in our outfit.

MH: Where in the war was that?

SL: Some place in Germany, I don't exactly remember.

MH: That was before Nordhausen.

SL: Yes.

MH: So, even in your eighties, this stuff keeps coming back?

SL: Pardon?

MH: So even in your eighties, sixty some years later, you—

SL: Oh, it was sixty-two years ago, yeah.

MH: Yeah. This stuff still comes up.

SL: Oh, yeah.

MH: You're married?

SL: Oh, yeah.

MH: Children?

SL: Well, I had a son who died, and then I have a daughter and five grandchildren and one great- child. My oldest grandson, who's twenty-two, a senior in college, plays football, he's quite a historian. He has all my medals and stuff. I have the Purple Heart and Bronze Star and Combat Infantry badge, which I honor.

MH: At what point did you tell your children or grandchildren about your experiences in the war?

SL: Well, as soon as they asked.

MH: And they did ask?

SL: Yeah, and during—when we lived in Arizona when I was in the Reserves, we had a kitchen bench, and in the bench was food and water for five or six months, because I had an assignment to go to Hoover Dam if we were attacked and protect Hoover Dam from sabotage, and they knew that, with my uniforms and everything that I had to go sometime. And they were quite proud of me. I mean, then I ended up as the mayor of the city.

MH: Which city was this?

SL: Coolidge, Arizona. And everybody was proud of that.

MH: I thought it was the Goldwaters who owned the department stores in Arizona.

SL: They owned the big ones in the big cities; we were in small towns.

MH: Do you happen to have any photos of yourself from the war?

SL: Yeah, I think so. I have more of my comrades than of me.

MH: You didn't take any pictures at the camp, did you, at Nordhausen?

SL: Yes. I lost those, but I have some other copies of—which were the exact copies I took, that were taken by the 413<sup>th</sup> camera people.

MH: Is it possible to borrow the pictures of the camps and a picture of you?

SL: Right now, they're at the Holocaust Museum, but I'll get them and send them to you.

MH: Okay. What I'd like is a picture back then and a picture of you now, if you have anything like that. Do you have an e-mail address?

SL: E-mail?

MH: Yes.

SL: Yes.

MH: What is it, please?

SL: ...

MH: Ah, okay. I'll send you an email with my address, and if you can get the pictures, if you want me to send you a photo envelope, I can.

SL: No, I have envelopes.

MH: Okay, and I will scan them and return the originals to you.

SL: Okay.

MH: Okay, I appreciate—

SL: What [are] you doing, writing a book?

MH: I'm writing a book that's going to be published by Bantam Dell, a division of Random House. It will be published in early 2010 and the working title is *The Last Liberators: America's Final Witnesses to the Holocaust*.

SL: We had a young boy here who made a documentary of ten people in the area, and told stories of World War II, and he took that of me also. And the kid is very, very good. They've been showing it around, and at the review there were about 500 people when he showed it the first time. It was very well received and received a lot of publicity.

MH: If I send you an e-mail, could you just respond and send me his name and phone number?

SL: I'll give it to you now. Hang on. ...

MH: Okay. Well, I'll give her a call tomorrow.

SL: Okay.

MH: All right—

SL: And what do you want to do? Use the pictures in the—

MH: I'd like to, yeah, pick a couple of them and be able to use them in the book.

SL: Have you been getting many stories?

MH: Yes, I've probably talked to about thirty guys—because what I'm trying to do is trace the last six weeks of the war through the liberation of the camps. So there's—there were a lot of camps. I mean, there were actually thousands of camps, but there were a number of American units that have been identified as liberating units.

SL: Yes, well, we have our flag at the—

MH: At the Holocaust Museum.

SL: Yes.

MH: Yes. So I'm trying to find as many guys as possible.

SL: Yeah, I read your letter in the Timberwolf magazine I got yesterday.

MH: Oh, okay.

SL: That's why I called you.

MH: Okay. Well, I sure appreciate your getting in touch with me. You have time for one funny story?

SL: Yes.

MH: I talked to a man this morning, who was with the—just a second and I'll tell you what unit he was with—the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, and they got to a camp called Landsberg.<sup>2</sup> But he was a Jewish guy from New York, and they sent him down to where the 63<sup>rd</sup> was in Mississippi. And in his entire company, he said, there were maybe four Jews and a lot of Southern boys who had never seen a Jew before. And he said every morning, you know, they'd wake everybody up—he recalled six o'clock; I don't ever

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hirsh is referring to Vincent Koch, who was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00070.

remember be allowed to sleep till six o'clock when I was in camp. But he said they'd wake everybody up at six, but he'd get up at five in the morning and put on tefillin so he could daven. And he said about three weeks in, the guy in the bunk next to him, who he said was a nice guy from Kentucky, took him aside and said, "Are you okay, Vince?" And he said, "Yeah, I'm fine. What's the matter?" He says, "Well, we've been noticing every morning you get up and you take your blood pressure." So that's about the funniest tefillin story that I've ever heard.

SL: Are you Jewish?

MH: Yes.

SL: That's cute.

MH: Yes.

SL: I'll have to tell my rabbi.

MH: Yeah, I'm waiting to tell mine that story. Okay.

SL: Okay.

MH: All right, thank you very much, sir. I sure appreciate your time.

SL: Bye-bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

***End of interview***