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Dorothy Maroon oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 12, 2008

Dorothy Maroon (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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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. Scratching noises occur during the recording.]

Michael Hirsh: We're talking with Miss Dorothy—

Dorothy Maroon: Maroon.

MH: Maroon, M-a-r-o-o-n.

DH: That's right.

MH: ... Your phone number is....

DM: Yes.

MH: Do you have an e-mail address?

DM: No.

MH: And you were with the 131st Evacuation Hospital that ended up at Gusen, G-u-s-e-n.

DM: Well, we were up in Gusen. Went up—we lived in tents. We followed the troops up to Germany. We got in at the tail end of the war.

MH: Let's start—let me start at the beginning. Where'd you grow up?

DM: Kingston, New York.

MH: And where'd you go to school, 'cause you were a nurse before the war?

DM: Yeah, Kingston, New York. I went to schools in Kingston and had my nurse's training down in New York City, Metropolitan Hospital, one city hospital down there. And from there I—

MH: You were a—you got your—?

DM: I got my RN. And as soon as I finished, the war was on already. I had two brothers who were already over there. They're both surgeons and they were both over there.

MH: What year was this that you got your RN?

DM: Well, I joined the Army in forty-four [1944], so it was about forty-four, I think—forty-three [1943] or forty-four [1944]. It was close to the end of the war. And I had my basic training in Atlantic City, and we were there for about a month.

MH: In Atlantic City?

DM: Yeah, basic training.

MH: What made you want to join the Army, though?

DM: I don't know. My brothers were in the Army. Everybody wanted to join the Army at that time. I mean, nurses, they needed nurses. They were asking for nurses. They were begging for them. And I wanted to go, it's just—

MH: Do you remember discussing it with your parents?

DM: Oh, they didn't like any part of it. Not their darling little youngest daughter going over there. But they finally came around.

MH: Tell me about that conversation. What do you say? They already have two sons over there.

DM: They had two sons over there—

MH: And now their daughter, who's how old? What's your birth date, by the way?

DM: Nineteen twenty-one, April 9.

MH: April 9, 1921. So, they already have two sons over there, and now a twenty-three year old daughter—

DM: More like twenty-one or twenty-two.

MH: Who says, "I want to go to war."

DM: Yeah. They didn't want me to go, believe me. I was the baby. They didn't want me to go to war at all. But they couldn't stop me. They didn't want to stop me too hard, but they didn't want me to go. They had two sons that were over there already; they were both doctors over there. In fact, the older of the two was over there for about five years in Japan, at part of an evacuation hospital.

MH: Did you think—did you see it as an adventure, or did you see it as, "This is what I have to do for my—"

DM: Oh, at that time, everybody was interested in going. It was wartime. Everybody wanted the war to be over with. It was definite—it was an adventure. It wasn't too much danger with nurses, but they didn't expect me to get into an evacuation hospital.

MH: So, you go to basic in Atlantic City—

DM: I went to basic in Atlantic City, and we had a hurricane down there, so they cut basic training short. They sent us to a hospital on Staten Island, three or four of us. We were through the war; in fact, there's the four of us in this picture here.

MH: Which four were you with?

DM: (points out four in picture)

MH: Oh, okay.

DM: And when I moved to Atlantic City about a month—basic training—but there was a hurricane in Atlantic City that year, so they shipped us out to Staten Island Hospital; it's a little hospital at Staten Island Army Hospital. From there, we got our orders. We were only there about a month, and we had orders to join the 131st Evacuation Hospital, so we were taken to South Carolina, to Camp Polk. We were only there for about a month. We were—at Christmas—I joined the Army in September, and at Christmas, I was in England.

MH: This is 1944. Okay, what does an evacuation hospital do as opposed to a field hospital?

DM: We're in tents. We followed—everything was in tents and we follow the soldiers up.

MH: So, how close behind the front lines are you?

DM: Well, we got in towards the end of the war, so it wasn't that bad, because we weren't that close. The fighting wasn't that much, but we followed them and saw all the rubble and all the buildings down. In fact, we ended next to Hitler's place up in—where was his place?

MH: Berchtesgaden?

DM: Up near there, yeah. We just set up an evacuation hospital, and all of a sudden, we got orders, the war ended. Big celebration. Then we got orders that they wanted—we were a new unit. They wanted us to go up and help out in the concentration camp up there.

MH: So, this was after the war ended?

DM: This is right after the war, because they wanted help in the concentration camps.

MH: Did you know anything about concentration camps?

DM: I'd read the papers. We're still—most of us were pretty smart.

MH: Was this in *Stars & Stripes* or civilian papers before you went over?

DM: We were over there, so we'd know what was going on over there. So, we landed in England—we stayed in England for a month or two, and then went over to France and then we started up through Germany and saw all the rubble and stuff going up. We were up in—right near Hitler's place at the end of the war, and then we got a notice that—

MH: What division were you with?

DM: 131st Evacuation Hospital.

MH: Was it attached to a division? To an infantry—

DM: I don't think so. We were just the 131st Evacuation Hospital. And we followed them up there, and the end of the war came, and we were happy we were going to be going home pretty soon; and all of a sudden, we get this notice that Camp Gusen was liberated, and they wanted our unit to go up and help the poor people up there.

MH: This would've been a couple weeks before the end of the war.

DM: That was right at the end of the war.

MH: Right at the end, okay.

DM: So, our unit was supposed to go up and help the people up in Gusen, but they didn't let the nurses go up right away, it was so bad. I have pictures at home, but they're not down here. Our soldiers went up there and they took care of—buried the people and the chaplain helped them; chaplain had a lot of pictures that we had. They're all up north. But it was only three or four days later, when we got a call to go up, the nurses to go up—they needed us so badly up there. So, we went up.

MH: How do you travel, in trucks?

DM: Trucks, back of trucks. There were forty nurses in our unit.

MH: Forty nurses and you're carrying tents and all your—

DM: Well, they carried them there, but we didn't have to carry them there. So we—in fact, between the time our soldiers went up—our unit, officers and stuff went up—we lived in the SS barracks. They had been gone by that time, so we lived in there. One day they called up and they told us if we wanted to go up and help out a concentration camp, they weren't gonna make us go, but if we wanted to go. All forty of us went.

MH: This is calling on the radio?

DM: Well, we got news. I don't know how—

MH: So what did they tell you about it?

DM: They said the conditions were horrible. And they didn't—we didn't have to go if we didn't want to, but all forty of us got on the back of the truck and went up. So, we went up there.

MH: How many nurses can ride in the back of one of those trucks?

DM: There was quite a few; there were two trucks.

MH: Two trucks? Okay. So, you go up there, and what's the first thing you see?

DM: Horrible, just pictures of Gusen stuff—I don't have any of the pictures. I wish I had some to show you. The men had buried the—the chaplain took a lot of pictures. He was the one who went up with the soldiers. The chaplain when up and—we saw them burying them by the—I tore them up one day. I just got disgusted looking at it, and I just threw everything out. But the poor people that were still left there. The countries over there came and got their own people that were prisoners there, like Austria and places like that. They came down and took them up.

MH: What did you do? I mean, you drive into the camp. Tell me what you see? What's it look like?

DM: Well, we saw some SS barracks—then they showed—there was tour of the crematoriums and the walls that they make the poor inmates walk up the walls and they stoned them to death. Horrible things. They showed us horrible things. I'm sure you read about those someplace. And we were all young.

MH: How do you react to that?

DM: I guess we connected it—I guess we had a little background of being a nurse that helped a little bit.

MH: But mostly, I mean, nurses—if you're trained in the Army as a nurse, you're trained to treat battle wounds and that sort of thing.

DM: I never trained as a nurse, dear, in the Army. I was trained in a civilian hospital.

MH: So, you're dealing mostly with illness and injury.

DM: Yes, but when I passed my state boards, I joined the Army right away, and then when they gave us basic training—and then we shipped over.

MH: But there's no training that can really prepare you for the concentration camp.

DM: No. We read the papers. The war was going on for two, three years before we even got into it, and we knew what was going on.

MH: What did you do? Did they have a hospital set up already?

DM: No, we lived in tents. When we got over to Germany and France, we lived in tents. Still lived in tents.

MH: But at Gusen.

DM: Gusen, I think we went back to—they put the nurses up in the old SS barracks. The SS troopers had a barracks close by.

MH: Right, and where did they put—

DM: All the big officers had barracks. They were just two-by-four rooms. They put us up there. We didn't stay up there very long. We ended up—

MH: Where did they set up the hospital, though? I mean did they set up tents to treat patients?

DM: We didn't set up hospitals. You just ran and took care of the patients that were left up there, but we didn't stay up there very long, because their own countries come and took them away. And we just took care of them for a while. I don't think we stayed up there more than a month or two.

MH: That's a long time in a camp like that.

DM: Well, we didn't actually live in the camp. We went back to the barracks at night by truck.

MH: How far away were the barracks?

DM: Not too far, about five miles or so.

MH: So, then they truck you into the camp.

DM: Trucked us in the morning.

MH: Tell me what a day is like?

DM: We went up there, you looked around, helped take care of some of the patients that were left. We weren't up there that long. And we took care whatever of some of the patients, but the countries came and took their own away.

MH: But initially, you had patients to take care of.

DM: Not really like you'd take care of them in the hospital. You just went around and saw what you could do to help anybody that was—that could be helped.

MH: What could you do?

DM: Nothing much. I mean, you helped them with their food, except—but we didn't stay there long, probably about a month or so at the most. But they were getting us ready to go over to Japan. Our unit was a new unit, so we were going home—they sent us home for leave for a month to go over to—

MH: To the invasion of Japan.

DM: Invasion of Japan—

MH: What was it like when you got that news?

DM: We knew we were going to go, but they sent us home, and I was sitting on the kitchen table playing gin rummy with my father when we got news of V-E Day.

MH: Of V-E? V-J—

DM: V-J Day, V-J Day. So we didn't lose V-J Day, so back in the Army—we were the youngest group; and the younger the group—they made us stay in the Army for six months or something. The older ones got out right away. We stayed in for six months or so; then we could get out if we wanted to, but they wanted us to stay so bad. But we were ready to get out.

MH: So, go back to Gusen for a minute. How did you communicate with the inmates?

DM: There weren't that many inmates left up there. They had sent—the countries had come and taken their men back what they could take back. There were just a few of them. We saw the crematoriums; we saw where they stoned them to death. It was a gruesome sight.

MH: You say “where they stoned them to death.” They were working in—

DM: We got stories from people around there that told us about this.

MH: Was this the camp that had the quarries? They were quarrying granite? There were a bunch of different Gusen camps.

DM: No, no, this one didn't have any quarries.

MH: Were they using these people for slave labor?

DM: They just were prisoners in the concentration camp. They were putting them to death, I guess almost as fast as they got up there, because they showed us how they had the crematorium and just pushed them in there and burned them to death. Corpsmen from

our unit took pictures. One day I said, "I don't want to look at these anymore," and I threw them out up north.

MH: So, you have no pictures left up north, or do you have some?

DM: No, nothing to talk about. I may have a couple, but they're not worth looking at. I wanted to forget the whole experience, wanted to take it out.

MH: Were you able to forget the experience?

DM: I still think about it. You can't see things like that. You talk to some of the inmates that you could talk to or some of the people left up there, and they told us how they used to stone the people to death. In fact, they found the commandant in the camp. I don't know who found him, and they dragged him down and hung him up—down in the camp.

MH: This is before you got there?

DM: Before we got there. They're very good about nurses not seeing too much of this stuff, but we got our stories from the enlisted men who told us.

MH: So, you come back to the United States, and V-J Day happens, so you don't have to go to Japan.

DM: I don't have to go to Japan.

MH: Now what do you do?

DM: Well, we had to go back to report to where we were supposed to report. When we did, the older ones of the group who had been in the Army for a long time got relieved of their duty, but the rest of us had to stay in the Army for a few more months. They want—they begged us to stay as nurses, but most of us wanted to go home to the States (inaudible). I was anxious to see my brothers. I hadn't seen them in years. They were in the Japan area.

MH: Your brothers had gotten sent from Europe to Japan?

DM: No, they went to Japan first. In fact, one was a flight surgeon, and the other one [was in an] evacuation hospital over there.

MH: Did your brothers ever get to the concentration camps?

DM: No. I was the only one that was in Europe.

MH: What did you do as a civilian? Did you go back to work as a nurse in the U.S.?

DM: Yeah, I got out of there, and I came back and I got a job working in a big hospital in New York, Presbyterian Hospital, think I went there, and I worked there a while. And everybody told me I was crazy, I wanted to go back to school and get a B.S. degree, so three of us decided to go up to Syracuse for two years and we got a B.S. degree in Education. Then I got a good job as a head nurse down in Bellevue Hospital on one of the private floors. I worked there for a while, till my brothers finished their residency down in New York, and they called me up one day and told me that they needed an office nurse, and they wanted me to go up and be with them. If I didn't go up, they'd hire somebody else. I like to think it was my family would like me up—it would be like the whole family back together again after all this, so I went up.

MH: This is where?

DM: Kingston.

MH: In Kingston? Okay.

DH: All of a sudden, the bottom fell out. One brother dropped dead of a heart attack, forty-two years old. He was swimming down in a country place we had up there. And the other one just didn't want to practice without him anymore. They were very close, so he got a job with [Bristol-Myers] Squibb Pharmaceutical. Perfect job. He traveled all over the country, pushing some of the drugs they had.

MH: Now, where did that leave you?

DM: Huh?

MH: Well then what did you do?

DM: What'd I do? I came down here. I worked for what they call a BOCES program. I taught high school students and adults to be practical nurses. I did that for a while, and I did that until I was sixty-five. Then I got a nice pension; I'm living on that. My brothers left me quite a bit. (coughs)

MH: When did you move to Venice?

DM: Oh, when I was sixty-five, sixty-eight. About twenty years ago.

MH: So, you like it here?

DM: I love it here. I like these condos. I bought this pre-construction—in fact, I really didn't buy it. I was ready to pay for it because I had the money to pay for it, but I found out I didn't have to pay for it. One of my brothers—who was still living—had bought it for me, which was nice. I had a nice family.

MH: You never married?

DM: Never got married. Nobody ever wanted me.

MH: I don't know about that.

DM: And I've been down here ever since, and I've enjoyed it. I worked at the BOCES; it's a high school program—an adult program.

MH: BOCES is B-O-C-E-S?

DM: Yeah, Board of Cooperative Education. It's the counties up there; every county had a BOCES, which took high school students and some adults to learn a trade. And we taught high school seniors and juniors half a day in BOCES to be practical nurses, and

they got their other subjects from their home school. That's how come I'm comfortably off; I got a nice pension from the school system in New York State.

MH: You've had reunions with the nurses?

DM: Yeah, we have reunions. In fact, we had one at my place. You see that one?

MH: What's it like getting together with people you went through the war with?

DM: Oh, we were buddy-buddy, like sisters.

MH: What do you guys talk about?

DM: Same thing anybody'd talk about. Things that happened and stuff like that.

MH: What's the one strongest memory you have from World War II?

DM: I remember the nurses very well. We were very, very close. In fact, the four of us you see in that picture there, we were really close. One of them is your friend's father. This is Sherry right here. Where my finger is, see it?

MH: Uh-huh.

DM: We were always tent-mates, the four of us. Every year, we've had a reunion, and I started having them in my place, so we had them down at my place because my brothers had a country place down here, and they had enough room for them. We used to get about fifteen, twenty of us. They used to come once a year, and they came. It was close to New York and close to a lot of places.

MH: In this article, it says it was pretty much like *M*A*S*H* on the TV show.

DM: Yeah.

MH: Do you remember funny things that happened?

DM: They weren't very funny when we were up there.

MH: Nothing.

DM: Not that part of it. But the Army wasn't that bad.

MH: Did you come under fire at all?

DM: Only time we came under fire was when they were bombing England. We were still in England when they were bombing—throwing the bombs down.

MH: So this was before you even went to the continent.

DM: Yeah.

MH: How close did the bombs come to you?

DM: We heard them very strongly. Bombing England pretty well at that time before we were sent over to France.

MH: Where in England were you?

DM: Altrincham, a little place right outside of—I can't remember where. Altrincham, England.

MH: Atringham?

DM: Altrincham. A-l-t-r-i—

MH: Altrincham, Okay.

DM: Where's that book I was gonna show you? There's one—(shuffling noises)
(muttering)

MH: If it's in there I can read it, I can—I have a copy of that that you gave me.

DM: You have a copy? It tells you all about our experiences and what we saw. You'll probably get a lot out of this.

MH: What's your cat's name?

DM: That's Honey.

MH: Honey?

DM: Mm-hm. My nephew came down last year—we always had cats. I didn't want an animal down here because I didn't know what would happen if something happened to me. And they came up and they said they found a cat down in the—under the stores of DSPCA—but the cat's in there. I should have a cat. I didn't want a cat because if something happened to me, what would happen to the cat, you know? They promised me faithfully they would take the cat up there. So they (inaudible) she sleeps with me, she does everything with me. An older lady must have had her one time. Did you read that? This is the same thing. This is our local paper up here.

MH: If I can—(inaudible)—if I can borrow this, I'll send get it back to you—

DM: Will you, please? I don't have too many.

MH: You don't have a picture of yourself other than—

DM: I don't want any pictures.

MH: From World War II, do you?

DM: No. I don't have anything. This is the one that came in the—that was in the paper.

MH: Yeah, that's the one I'm talking about.

DM: Yeah, take a copy of that. I'd like these back, if I can.

MH: I will give them back to you, I promise. Anything else to tell me about it?

DM: I don't know there's anything much to tell you about it. We got in at the tail end of the war. We were all young. When the war was over, they let the older nurses go, but we had to stay for another year or so. Then they wanted us to stay longer, but I'd had it.

MH: All right. Yeah.

End of interview.