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Hana Berger Moran oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, February 4, 2009

Hana Berger Moran (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.]

Hana Berger Moran: There was a gentleman from Texas who called me one day from his phone—from his car. It was interesting. And he said, "I, too, was a liberator from Mauthausen. I just want you to know I was there." So, I will check the name and then I will get it to you. Mr. Hirsh, I'm looking at the website, actually. I think it's you. You wrote *At War with Ourselves*?

Michael Hirsh: No, that's the interesting thing.

HM: Oh, a different Michael Hirsh.

MH: There's a Michael Hirsh who was a senior editor of *Newsweek* magazine. Actually, I've given speeches where I've been introduced with a list of his books and my books, and I've had to stand up and say, "I don't want to disappoint you—"

HM: (laughs) "That's not me!"

MH: "—but I'm not the Renaissance man you think I am."

HM: (laughs)

MH: I spent most of my career in television. In fact, you were at the University of Chicago?

HM: Yes.

MH: I worked for WTTW there for about eighteen years.

HM: Okay. Great. All right.

MH: And then I began writing books in the late nineties [1990s].

HM: More power to you. That's wonderful. And one of them is what? Sorry, I interrupted you.

MH: It just—when it became impossible for—we lived in Los Angeles then, and you hit a certain age where you can't—you know, somebody my age, who is just about the same age as you are, a couple years older. I can't pitch book or TV ideas to twenty-six year old network executives who know everything.

HM: (laughs) And I was only saying to myself that, thank God when my son turned twenty-one, I again regained my brain.

MH: Right, 'cause I—

HM: (laughs) Until my son turned twenty-one, I knew nothing.

MH: Of course. There is that period of time. Yes. So, when did you come to this country?

HM: I came to this country in 1977 for a postdoctoral fellowship at University of Chicago, because I completed my doctorate at Weizmann Institute in Israel after I got there in sixty-eight [1968]. I emigrated from Czechoslovakia ten days following the invasion of our [Eastern Bloc] brothers. I decided—I was expecting my only child, and I said there's no way I'm going to raise him there. It was instilled in me that living in war

and bringing a child to life in a war is not a very good thing. For me, that invasion is equated with a war. Just hearing some shooting was enough, so I left.

I landed in Israel, because that's where I had family, and I didn't want to be basically staying at some camp waiting to be allowed to a country like Switzerland or Germany, Canada, even the U.S. So, when I came to the United States in seventy-seven [1977]—my mother was still alive until 2006. She encouraged me to find my liberators. I am a little bit of a procrastinator, and I'm inherently—I wouldn't say withdrawn. I'm kind of a private person, so I did not have the gumption to start looking for them.

MH: Why did she encourage you to find them?

HM: Well, she felt that I should go and say thanks, and she was right. As a matter of fact, in sixty-five [1965] she encouraged me to write the letter of thanks to people who had—on the way from the camp where she was imprisoned and where she gave birth, to the camp where the whole transport was supposed to be killed, Mauthausen. They stopped at a little town called Horní Bříza, which is near Plzeň in the western part of Czech Republic.

MH: Let me back you up. The name of the town is what?

HM: Horní Bříza.

MH: How would you even spell that?

HM: Okay, so this is when we—may I suggest something?

MH: Yes.

HM: Do you have an email?

MH: Yes.

HM: Perfect, because I have some of it summarized.

MH: Oh, okay.

HM: But also, because I will have your email address I can write you some of those things. But in the meantime, I can answer your questions.

MH: Okay, so you stopped at that town, and what happened?

HM: At this town, because the German soldiers and guards were on the road with the prisoners, they, too, were hungry and tired and running out of any provisions. When the people at the train station heard me crying, they said they hear a child, and if they are allowed to help mother and the child then they will provide for the guards, and that happened. So, they helped my mother and the guards allowed that, and they also provided some food and drinking for the guards. And they even provided for my mother some clothing for me, which of course I had none, except a little shirt and a little hat, which presently is actually—I donated that to the Holocaust Museum in Washington [D.C.].

MH: The letter that you wrote to the 11th Armored Division Association said that your journey started from Freiburg in Germany?

HM: Yeah.

MH: And it went through Czechoslovakia?

HM: Right. Through Czechoslovakia, yes. As a matter of fact, there's a book that just came out in German that's talking about the secret pregnancy inside that. There were an additional two children that were born there: one before me, one after me, one of them to a kapo. You know what that is, right?

MH: Yes.

HM: And I think even the second one—to make a long story short, there is a really—a map—of that transport.

MH: In that book, you mean?

HM: Yeah. It's in German; it just came out. I was sent an announcement by Amazon Germany from the author.

MH: When we finish, I'll give you my email address; if you could just—

HM: Perfect.

MH: Well, what was the—you also said that the journey by train took seventeen days?

HM: That's correct.

MH: That was constantly moving, or a lot of sitting and siding?

HM: The train was constantly moving back and forth, running from the army, so it was retracing: going back, going to the side, and going back. My mother, when she talks about that particular experience, she was saying how happy she was to see the words—the names—in Czech, because she felt that that the war is really, really ending, which means that they will be liberated soon. She spoke both German and English at that time already.

MH: I didn't realize that. She was able to communicate with the American doctor and with the—

HM: The staff. Yes. Yes, she did. She talked English, actually.

MH: Okay, because in the interview I did with LeRoy Petersohn, he talked about the doctor speaking to her in German.¹

HM: Well, maybe he did, but Mother spoke English already. Maybe her English was halted, but that's how she was describing it.

MH: What did she tell you about the time in Mauthausen as the Americans were coming?

¹ LeRoy Petersohn was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00105.

HM: You know, Mr. Petersohn told me more. My mother spoke about it very little, which I never understood. However, when Pete told me what happened, namely that after she showed me to the doctor and was told that there has to be a surgery, she handed me to them. She never discussed it. You know, what I just realized after I heard it this October, when Pete and I participated in the Shofar award celebration in Albany, and he said to me, “You know, we had to take you away to another camp where the facility—medical facility—that we put together was more sophisticated.”

MH: He told me they took you to Gusen.

HM: Yes, that’s what he told me. My mother never told me that; she just said, “They took you, they did the surgery. When they brought you back, I thought you were dead because the nurse cried.” So, she told me these few things. She told me they—the guards, when they were unloaded from the train—took everything that she had for me [that] she got in Horní Bříza, which was children’s clothes and some swaddles and diapers. They took it away, and they also told her, “No children in the camp.” They tried to remove me from her hands and she started to fight with them, at which point some guards—among them a woman, who was Polish, a guard woman—came, and my mother said she didn’t see a child in six years and she wanted to play. So, she saved my life by saying she wanted to play with me, which apparently she did, and they allowed my mother to watch it from outside through the window.

Then, Mother didn’t talk much, except that she was in that *Zigeunerlager* with other women from Freiburg. When the American army came, the 11th Armored came, and Mother could communicate with them a little, she said, which she told me and I had no reason to believe—whether it was English or German, I don’t know. But she already spoke fluent English at that time. She was told, as I told you earlier, that in order to save my life, because I was kind of—all my—I didn’t have much muscle on my body, but I had lot of—I had infected skin.

So, the decision by the physician was to operate: to clear the infection, to remove the infection surgically and clean, and administer penicillin. And that’s what happened. I still have scars all over my body; the only place in the face is on the chin, but everything—you know, just the whole body has scars in various places, some large, some small. And then Mother said they—as I said, the nurse brought her—and the doctor. I don’t know if Pete as well, but the doctor tried to convince my mom to come to United States, because they felt that post-war Europe may not be a place for a child in my condition to survive.

Mother decided, however, that she could come back, because my father will be coming

back from wherever he was detained. Toward the end of May, she was in the first boat down the Danube [River], which was following, actually, the boat or ship which was looking for the remainder of the bombs. They landed in Bratislava, which was the town where we lived before the war. My father didn't come back. The cuts got infected again, so she just went to the hospital. Luckily, Bratislava was not bombarded too much. The hospital still stood, and the major—most of the city. And I had another surgery right there, and here I am.

MH: How did—your parents were taken from their home and sent to Auschwitz, right?

HM: Yes.

MH: What was the step that got you from Auschwitz to Freiburg?

HM: My mother and father were separated. She spent two weeks in the camp for able women in Auschwitz, who were then deported to the labor camps in Germany. So, it was two weeks after their arrival to Auschwitz. They went from Bratislava via kind of a centering camp—how should I say it? It wasn't really a camp, although it later became one; it was a town in Slovakia called Sereď. And then from there, the transport went to Auschwitz.

Apparently, from what I understand from my mother, she saw my father one more time when in Auschwitz, across the wire. And afterwards, we don't really know what happened, because when I tried to follow where he was, the only place I could find for him was actually Auschwitz. Although in Bratislava lived some people who swore that they saw—they were with him in another labor camp, which was in Poland, which was a satellite camp of Auschwitz—and that he died of hunger two weeks before the end of the war.

MH: What type of labor camp was Freiburg?

HM: Oh, very interesting. They were working on airplanes in a factory. It used to be a textile factory, which was turned to a factory for manufacturing of war planes. Mother said to me, "You can't trust one plane that left that factory." She was working on making the—I mean, not making new things, but assembling the wings.

MH: To jump way ahead, when you sent the letter to the 11th Armored Division Association, how long after you sent the letter did you hear from Pete?

HM: Within days. It was unbelievable. I immediately started to get correspondence and suggestions: who may still be alive and where they are, all the way to (inaudible). I followed every direction, and finally there was the address for Pete Petersohn, or LeRoy Petersohn, and we started to correspond. And his first words were, "I always wondered what happened to that baby." It was quite—even in the emails, it was already very touching.

MH: And what was the first phone call?

HM: Oh, we were just giggling. (laughs) The first phone call, it was just like, "I don't believe this," and, "This is wonderful," and, "We have to meet soon," which was then arranged, luckily during the celebration in Mauthausen.

MH: Tell me about that. That was the sixtieth anniversary?

HM: Correct.

MH: Tell me about that. You hadn't met in person until then.

HM: No, we hadn't. And it was very interesting. I kept—I got several messages from Mr. Max Garcia, whom I didn't know, here in San Francisco. He didn't tell me what he was involved with until finally probably the third message, when he was a little bit exasperated. He said, "I'm involved with the Mauthausen liberation celebration, the sixty year anniversary. I was at Mauthausen and Gusen as a young teenager and I am on the committee, and I would like you to come to the celebration."

MH: And who is this telling you this?

HM: Sorry?

MH: Who is this telling you this?

HM: It's Max. Mr. Max Garcia.

MH: Okay.

HM: G-a-r-c-i-a.

MH: Okay.

HM: He was—his ancestors were Spanish Jews who, during the Inquisition, were forced to leave Spain and moved to Holland. They ended in Holland, and that's where he was born, and from which he was also taken to a camp. He was sixteen years old at that time.

MH: So, he tells you that they want to bring you to Mauthausen.

HM: To Mauthausen. And only when he told me I would meet with Mr. Petersohn did I agree to go. I felt—I went to Mauthausen with my mom when I was twenty years old, and it was a very difficult experience. I didn't make much—I wasn't hysterical, because I'm not a hysterical person. I just know that it was very difficult for me, and I was not looking forward to repeat that experience. The most difficult part was seeing photographs of people who were killed the last day, the day that we arrived in the evening. They were the last people killed in the gas chambers. It was really difficult to deal with it, and to see it all.

So, I was twenty years old then. Many years later, I guess I was a little bit more mature, and once I understood that Mr. Petersohn would be there as well, it was easy to say yes. My husband and I went to the celebration.

MH: Just describe for me the meeting.

HM: The meeting with Mr. Petersohn?

MH: Yes.

HM: Well, I have to tell you first what Max said that happened. It's because he has two sons, who are wonderful young men, brought him in because they arrived to Vienna and then had a van bring them to Mauthausen. He was quite tired and it was evening, and we were downstairs in the restaurant with all the people who were participating in the

celebration the evening before. Suddenly, I heard these people coming through, and I knew it was him.

So, I kind of waited until he settled down and sat down. He looked very tired, and I kind of scooted next to him and I sit next to him. I didn't say a word. I let him talk, describe the trip. And suddenly, I notice that everybody went quiet, his sons were quiet, and he was still talking. I'm not saying anything, I'm just looking at him, and I'm thinking "Wow!" Then I put my hand on his knee, and he turned around and says "Hana!" Of course, it was very emotional. And Max was just standing there. He says, "You should have seen it. Everybody went quiet. We were just waiting what will happen."

And as I'm talking about it, I have goosebumps. Because, frankly, as hokey as it may sound—and I said it also in Albany—I have two birthdays, you know. I was born April 12 [1945], and then I was born again in May 5 [1945]. And that's thanks to LeRoy and his physician, and of course the 11th Armored. He took care of me; he took me in. And apparently, from what his sons say, he kept often talking about this baby and he doesn't know what happened to that baby. So, those things I learned later. But what I did—except for the first time when we talked on email, he mentioned that. It felt very comfortable to meet him. I was just totally choked up.

MH: What did he look like?

HM: He looked—well, may I ask in what sense?

MH: I'm just curious. Sometimes people build an expectation in their mind of what this person who was so important to their life looks like, and then you finally meet him and he either matches that expectation or is completely different.

HM: You know, I am not pretending. I had no mental image. What I had an image of was some young soldier. I never thought of him as being an adult in his early eighties, and when I met him, it just kind of— yeah, it makes sense. I never stopped to think whether it was my expectation or (inaudible). It just felt very safe. Am I making sense?

MH: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

HM: Okay.

MH: Did you ever find the doctor?

HM: Well, no, because I started to look really, really closer to (inaudible) looking really quite late. What Pete said—the first thing he said was, “I wish the doctor could see you, but he passed on last year.” Although, when I was getting responses from the members of the 11th, they were saying, “Oh, the doctor may be here, may be there,” and finally one of them said, “Oh, no, he passed on.”

MH: He passed on? All right.

HM: He did. But I saw the picture. I got the photograph, and I actually have it. Pete gave it to me.

MH: One of the things I had asked him for—and actually, the 11th Armored guy—

HM: Dan Brown?

MH: Well, I talked to Dan Brown, and Dan Brown referred me to a man named Duane Mahlen.² And Duane said, “LeRoy’s mind is not all that good, you know. Call him in the morning; he sorta goes in and out.” I’ve never been able to get a photograph from him, and I was hoping that you have a photograph of the two of you together.

HM: Oh, of Pete and I?

MH: Yes.

HM: I will send it to you. Oh, yes, I do. Several photographs, one when we met in Mauthausen in that little restaurant, and of course when we were at the celebration. We have one that was actually in the paper, also, in Korea.

MH: Okay. Do you have it scanned, or is it just—

HM: Yes, I do. I can just—that’s why when you give me your email, I will be able to send

² Duane Mahlen was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00082.

these things.

MH: Okay. What is your email address?

HM: Okay, the best address would be ... and if you want to drop me a line—

MH: That's what I'll do. That's what I'll do.

HM: That will be probably the simplest.

MH: Right. Did you become an American citizen?

HM: Yes, in 1983.

MH: Okay. I found a short biography of you online.

HM: Yeah, I didn't know how it got there.

MH: Actually, my researcher is the woman who has typed all the transcripts for this book and for my other books, and I had told her I was sort of frustrated at—you know, Pete was supposed to send me contact information for you and he never did, and then he had told me to call his son and his son doesn't return phone calls.

HM: Yes. Brian is overwhelmed with work.

MH: Yeah. So, I mentioned this to—I've actually just started writing a Mauthausen chapter in the book and I sent a note of frustration to my researcher, and yesterday morning I found an email back that said "Knock yourself out."

HM: (laughs)

MH: And it had the letter that you sent to the 11th Division. It had some stuff about Lipid Sciences.

HM: Yeah, I left there. Okay, I can fill in the blanks. And I will send you—do you read German?

MH: No, I don't, but my personal computer expert is a young man who's half German, half Filipino, and he does all my translating for me.

HM: So, what I can do—I can give you the details of this book, and two books about Freiburg and the birth of the children there, and the details about Mauthausen. They are accessible through Amazon. And, of course, I will send you the pictures of Pete himself, if you can give me a couple of days.

MH: Sure, there's no rush.

HM: Okay.

MH: There's no rush.

HM: I will definitely do that.

MH: This short biography said that you've worked on thirty Investigational New Drug filings and nine product approvals.

HM: That is correct.

MH: Any drug names that I would know?

HM: Yeah, one of them is called Thymoglobulin; I don't know if you know it. One that you would know is cyclosporine. So, it was a generic cyclosporine. It made Novartis a little bit unhappy. We have withdrawn that drug from the market; it was not selling. It was a generic type liquid type oral suspension cyclosporine. That one you will know. And then, Thymoglobulin—

MH: Thymo?

HM: Thymoglobulin.

MH: How do you spell that?

HM: T-h-y-m-o, thymo.

MH: Okay, and then globulin.

HM: Globulin, which is for prevention of organ rejection. So, it's for transplantation patients. Then the INDs that I have filed got approved—the ND is New Drug application. One of the drugs is Zanaflex; that's on the market for treatment of spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis.

MH: Beneflex?

HM: Zanaflex. Z-a-n-a-f-l-e-x.

MH: Okay.

HM: Botulinum Toxin Type B; that's also for spasticity.

MH: (typing) Okay.

HM: I have two dogs who are chasing squirrels; squirrels are outside, the dogs are inside. I apologize for the noise.

MH: Oh, no problem. All right. Well, I'll send you an email with the information in it, and when you have time, if you can send me the other information and the photos?

HM: Right, I will. I can also tell you that there is another person who has written more a sort of fiction, and she's using the reality or fact—nonfiction (inaudible). Her name is Tricia Goyer.

MH: Yeah, I've read the book.³ Interestingly enough, the problem I have is sometimes you talk to people and they've taken the fiction from her book and sort of made it their own.

HM: Oh, yeah, I know. I didn't even finish the book, though. I understand, I just wanted to know if you are familiar with her work.

MH: Yeah, I'm familiar with it.

HM: Okay.

MH: As strange as things happen, about three weeks before I began to think about doing this book, I was—my wife keeps telling me, “You gotta get rid of your books. You've got too many books. You've got too many books.”

HM: (laughs) You should be in this house.

MH: And I boxed up all my Holocaust books and donated it to our synagogue library.

HM: Oh, my goodness!

MH: Three and a half weeks later, I began writing this book and had to start buying books back.

HM: No, you should go back to the library and rent them.

MH: Well—

HM: I shouldn't say the word “should.” (inaudible) when somebody did it to me, so I'm sorry.

³ *From Dust and Ashes: A Story of Liberation*, published by Moody Publishers in 2003.

MH: But, I mean, I found just amazing stories.

HM: I promised one person, a rabbi in New York—I was just visiting my son in Brooklyn and his family. But before I got there, I was contacted by a rabbi, a young woman rabbi named Joanna Samuels, whose mother-in-law—now, this is very entertaining. She doesn't know much about what happened, because her mom never talked to her, and she was born in Sztutowo [Stutthof], which was another labor camp. Sztutowo. She was born on seventeenth of April [1945]. Her mom never talked to her about this, and then she passed away.

So, basically, Esther—that's her name—doesn't know much. She lives in Montreal, and we are now connected via Skype and will probably congratulate each other on our next birthday. But it's kind of amazing, because—it's just amazing to see us, the children of the Holocaust, that we made it. And we are, I think, quite normal, going about our lives and having children and grandchildren.

MH: I have a question, which is not necessarily about the book, but just because I'm curious. How do you feel about the German people?

HM: Very conflicted, very conflicted. And the reason is that I really, truly don't trust the people in that country, because of the precedent of what happened with such an educated nation and how systemic, how organized that hatred was. When I went to Germany—my ex-husband actually left Israel and was living in Germany. I joined him for exactly six weeks, and after six weeks of hearing things like people who were guests in my home and ate my food saying the Nuremberg Trials were just for show or they shouldn't have happened, you know, at that point I just withdrew myself to the kitchen and never came out to be social. So my stomach just flips when I'm going through Germany. When I'm in Germany, I don't do anything overt. I can't help it. It's ingrained.

(phone rings)

MH: Hold on just for a moment, please. Let me just turn this other phone off.

(on other phone) I'll call you later.

Um, I'm—

HM: How do you feel about that?

MH: Well, I—what keeps surprising me is how easy it was for them to find people to help with the killing, even in the last two or three months of the war when it was clear they were gonna lose the war. And I mean—I don't understand. I don't know what kind of people these are who can—you know, the last thing they did going out the gate of Buchenwald was to shoot forty people in the head.

I have—the woman who until recently cut my hair is German, and her father was in the Hitler Youth. We got to discuss this, and she said “Well, you know, he had to be.” And I'm thinking, “You know, well, at some point you gotta make a choice. You're either gonna be part of it or you're gonna—maybe it means essentially committing suicide, but you don't.” And then recently, on inaugural night, we had a big party down here and she was there with her husband, Dieter. She'd told him about the book, and he wasn't really happy with my writing the book.

And he starts to tell me this long story about how there was an American airman or soldier named Shapiro, who was captured in Greece, and he ended up in the custody of this German POW camp commander. And the Gestapo—I'm telling this story the way he told it; I have no knowledge of any of this being fact. The Gestapo came to them and said, “We want all your German prisoners. We know you have this guy Shapiro. We want him.” He refused to give him to the Gestapo, and that man lived. They ended up marching all the way from Greece to Bavaria, and then the war was over.

And he's telling me this as though he's proud of it, and I'm thinking, “Yeah, that was one. That was one German who did the right thing. What about the tens of thousands who didn't?” And here's a man who's, you know, essentially my contemporary age-wise. I'm sixty—how old am I? I'm gonna be sixty-six.

HM: You're young. I will be sixty-four in April.

MH: Well, you were born a day before I was. I was born April 13, forty-three [1943].

HM: (laughs) May I call you Michael?

MH: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm just listening to the way this man is thinking, as though they shouldn't be held responsible because one guy tried to do the right thing.

HM: Yeah. Michael, where do you live in Florida?

MH: I live in a small town called Punta Gorda. It's half—it's on the Gulf coast between Sarasota and Fort Myers.

HM: I heard that it's pretty on the Gulf coast.

MH: It's very nice. It's not nearly as crowded. We occasionally get beaten up by a hurricane, but I lived in Los Angeles and I had earthquakes, and trust me, hurricanes are better than earthquakes.

HM: Is that right?

MH: You get a warning.

HM: The reason I'm asking is because my husband and I are going to Miami. He has some business in Miami in the end of March, and I am tagging along. For a couple of days I am just simply going to be walking around Miami. I was thinking if you were living in Miami we could meet.

MH: When are you gonna be there?

HM: You know, I don't know exactly, but it's towards the end of March.

MH: Could you just email me and let me know when and where?

HM: I will do that. And also, we probably—we are not staying on the beach but in one of the Hilton hotels, because we have points.

MH: That's—

HM: I don't know what the drive would be.

MH: That's about a three hour drive. I need to go to the east coast, anyhow, 'cause there's some people I've interviewed, some of the liberators that I need to—

HM: It could be a good time to meet face to face. You know, I can bring those books with me as well, but in the meantime I will send you all the information so you can order them.

MH: Okay. Well, all right. I thank you very, very much, and I'll send you an email with my contact information, if you can send me the photos.

HM: I really appreciate you for writing this kind of book because we really, really shouldn't forget.

MH: This is true. And these guys are passing away right and left.

HM: Yeah, exactly.

MH: Okay. Well, thank you very, very much.

HM: Thank you.

MH: I sure appreciate it.

HM: Bye-bye.

MH: Take care. Bye-bye.

HM: You too.

End of interview