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## Edmund S. Motzko oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, December 23, 2008

Edmund S. Motzko (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:** Just so I have it on tape, your name is Edmund S. Motzko, M-o-t-z-k-o?

**Edmund S. Motzko:** Right on; you got the last name right too.

MH: And you're at.... And your phone number is.... What's your date of birth, sir?

EM: August 17, 1920.

MH: What unit were you in?

EM: I was with the 548<sup>th</sup> Automatic Weapons Anti-Aircraft Artillery [Battalion]—the next sized gun, we were automatic weapons.

MH: In the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division?

EM: Yes, and we were attached to the 102<sup>nd</sup> Division.

MH: When did you go into the service?

EM: I joined the National Guard in June of 1940.

MH: When were you called to active duty?

EM: We were federalized in February of 1941. And I was with the Long Prairie National Guard, and we went with a group on a troop train with Long Prairie (inaudible) to Camp Hahn, California.

MH: When did you finally go to Europe?

EM: I stayed in the Bay Area. We were getting down to one of our last—to put in one year, and we went to the Bay Area for one of our last maneuvers, so this was in December of 1941—no, it had to be later, yeah. So, we were designated for Treasure Island, and Treasure Island, that's where the World's Fair was [in 1939]. And we had three-inch anti-aircraft guns, and that's where our battery set up. On Sunday, I was in San Francisco on pass, and all of a sudden, we heard that Pearl Harbor was attacked, and all servicemen were supposed to return to their bases immediately, and all public transportation was free. So, we made a few bars, as many as we could, and I think there were six of us. The cabbies were always taking advantage of us, so each one of us took one cab apiece back to Treasure Island.

MH: (laughs) When did they finally send you to Europe?

EM: Well, we stayed in the Bay Area until—let's see, in 1944. I went back to Camp Hahn. There was an outfit that couldn't make it overseas with their—they couldn't pass their tests, overseas test. So, they took a nucleus of this group for the Bay Area, and I was one of them, and put us in there, and we were all set to go overseas from Camp Hahn, and then from Camp Hahn we went to New York and shipped out.

MH: How'd you get attached to the 102<sup>nd</sup>?

EM: Well, I think that was part of the deal before we went overseas, that we were—

*Pause in recording*

MH: So, you were telling me about going over to the 102<sup>nd</sup>.

EM: Yes, well after we got to England, we got all our equipment, and then we went across the channel. That was in—let's see, what month was that in? Well, September right because I went into combat after we crossed the Channel, we landed in France there on the beach, and that was well after—

MH: After D-Day?

EM: Yeah after D-Day. And as a matter of fact, from there, after we landed in France, then we went into combat. It was on Thanksgiving Day in forty-four [1944]. And we went into combat in the Netherlands, and we stayed on the—let's see, what river was it? We were there for quite a while, till after Christmas.

MH: You were in the Battle of the Bulge?

EM: No, but we were—as a matter of fact, we were in the pocket, so we were surrounded. That was—we got to the Ruhr River, yeah. We were on the Ruhr River and we sat there until well after Christmas before we finally crossed the Ruhr River. And then we went from the Ruhr River to the Rhine, and we crossed the Rhine River and then we went on our way to the Elbe River, and when we got—well, before we got to the Elbe River, that's when we run into the Gardelegen atrocity.

MH: Did you know anything about the concentration or death camps before that?

EM: We knew a little, but very little. As a matter of fact, we weren't fully aware of how serious they were until we run into this one.

MH: Tell me about that day. What time of day did you first see it?

EM: Well, it happened on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> [of April 1945], is when they torched the barn, but we got there the following day or the day after, I don't remember exactly. But the commanding officer told us, "What you're going to see, you won't believe this could ever have happened." And, of course, this right away kind of perked up our ears. So, a group of us—well, we were in Gardelegen, and so a group of us went out there, and we got—well, it was more than a block away, and the odor was so bad, there were lots of GIs that

couldn't hack the smell of burned flesh and clothing. It was that bad. But I had worked in a meat market, so I was able to kind of ride it out. So, I brought my camera with me, and when we got there, I started taking pictures, and I was one of the few that walked through the center of the barn and took pictures.

MH: What did you see as you were approaching the barn?

EM: Well, I could see from the outside, there was bodies laying along the edge of the barn, and there was—when we arrived, it was as large—it was an all-tile building, and they put two foot of straw on the floor and then saturated it with gasoline, and they run these 1,016 people in there. That was on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. And some of them kind of suspected something when they could smell the gasoline. Then they torched it that night, and when they torched it, they set up these—there was a group of *Luftwaffe* that was not too far from there, and they were put on as guards, so they stood at the door with machine guns and stuff, and they shot most everything that tried to get out.

MH: What did you see when you went inside the barn?

EM: Well, when I first went there, I had pictures taken, but two piles of bodies were still smoldering when I got there, and they were on the left side of the building by two huge doors.

MH: These people had tried to get out and piled up by the door?

EM: Yeah, piled up by the door trying to get out, and so, with that—that was bad enough, of course, but there was all these dead bodies alongside the building that did get out, and they shot them. And so, then I went around to the backside of the building, and that's where they had dug a long trench for burial. I got up on this trench and took some pictures from the backside, and at that particular time, I didn't know, but they had already 500 buried under where I was taking pictures. I didn't know that until the next day or whenever.

And so I took these pictures, and then—well, I came back there again, and then it was—because there was live grenades and stuff still inside, they taped it off. You weren't allowed to go through the inside. And then in the meantime, after this, there was, oh, from six to ten of them that survived this ordeal. And the one fellow was Bondo Gaza [Geza Bondi]; he was a Hungarian Jew. They put him in Gardelegen in a home, and they had a home all to themselves, and the citizens had to feed them and give them their liquor rations and all that stuff.

But he was my interpreter for the group, and I and another fellow were put on guard duty to protect these guys, because they figured that they'd get an SS man or somebody in there to annihilate them, which they didn't. But I had quite a time talking with these guys. Bondo Gaza was with another fellow, and they managed to get out of the barn, and they were crawling away, and he was ahead of him a ways, and an SS trooper come along with a dog and sniffed out the guy behind him, and he was automatically shot. So, Bondo Gaza—

MH: Can I just call you back in about two minutes?

EM: Sure.

MH: Somebody's at the front door.

EM: Okay.

MH: Call you right back.

***Pause in recording***

MH: Um, in any event, when you had this man who was translating for you, did he tell you who it was who was working with the SS when they burned this place and they shot everybody?

EM: No, he didn't. He was just one of them, and they knew little or nothing. But I have the names and stuff, here in the booklet that I have. But—

MH: There are stories that there were Hitler Youth involved and—

EM: No, no.

MH: And local *Volkssturm*, the older people who hadn't been in the service.

EM: No, it was pretty much these SS troopers that did it.

MH: But they had a lot of help, you know, guarding the barn.

EM: Well, all these Luftwaffe cadets from over—well, within just a few miles of here: they were the ones that were put on guard duty outside when they torched it, and they were the ones that shot these people down as they tried to escape. So, they were pretty much involved. They never did too much to them. Well, of course, they were in service, and that was their duty. They were told to do that, and they did.

MH: What did any of the survivors say about how they got out of the place?

EM: This one—about the only one I found about was Bondo Gaza.

MH: How are you spelling that?

EM: B-o-n-d-o G-a-z-a, and he was a Hungarian Jew. And he spoke several languages, but he spoke English very well. And I could converse with him quite well.

MH: How did he get out of the barn? It's surrounded by people with guns, it's on fire.

EM: Well, this is at night, see, on a Friday night, and after it was dark. I didn't fully understand how he got out of the fire or why he didn't burn, him and this other fellow, but that's when they started crawling away from the barn. And, of course, this SS trooper spotted them—or not SS but this guy with the air station there, air cadet. And he shot his friend, and he says he just curled up and played dead, and the dog and him never came to him.

MH: How do you deal with all this, when you're seeing it?

EM: Well, I was—I just couldn't believe it. Just like the guy said, "What you're gonna see, you're not gonna believe," but he says, "You'll have to see it to believe it," and that's the truth. That's exactly—we knew of some other atrocities, but we didn't know they were that severe. So, it was definitely an eye opener. And of course, what we had—our feelings of the German soldiers was bad, but this was the turning point, here. There was only one good German, and that was a dead German.

MH: I mean, the fact that this happened so near the end of the war—I mean, they could have just—they had these 1,100 people. They could have just kept them together until the 102<sup>nd</sup> Division got there.

EM: Well, yeah. Well you see, this unit, they were in another camp, and they put pressure on them, and so they moved them out of this camp, and they had another camp to where they were going. But we had already captured this town, so they couldn't take them there. That's how come they ended up in Gardelegen. But they were all set to go to this camp, which wasn't too far from there. But we had already captured this town, and so they—I can't remember the name of the town right offhand, but I've got it written down.

So, that's how come they had—this German officer decided they had to get rid of them instead of hang onto them. And, of course, after they found out about it, then they had the German civilians from Gardelegen, all able-bodied men had to come out one day, and they marched them out there. They had to bury each one individually in graves, and that was supposed to be their duty of that family to take care of that gravesite from then on. But they marched them out there, and they had to go into the barn and pick up a body and carry it to the cemetery, which was a short distance away. And by that time, the bodies were in bad shape and quite slippery, and it was quite a mess. But they did put up—we put up infantrymen along the way, where when they picked up the body, they had to practically—they had to move as fast as they could, and they had their bayonets on, and they prodded them along and stuff like that to keep them going and get them to where the gravesite was.

MH: They weren't doing this of their own free will, the local citizens?

EM: No, they were being forced. That was part of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Division commander, he ordered these people out there that they had to come and see this, and then take this body and bury it.

MH: Were they saying anything?

EM: Well, I don't recall of anything, but I imagine they did. I have a book of some pictures of it.

MH: What happened with the pictures that you took?

EM: Oh, well—yeah, my pictures, I had about twenty of them. My pictures are in the Holocaust Museums in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., and Gardelegen, Germany.

MH: Are they online?

EM: Well, I would think so. I know that I also received a liberator's certificate in Washington, D.C. And then the Minnesota Historical Society has a very nice write-up with pictures and such.

MH: I found your name on that site. I didn't realize your pictures are on that site, though.

EM: Yeah, there's quite a story that goes with it, if you found that. It was with the liberators and POWs, and I was with the liberators.

MH: How did seeing something like Gardelegen affect you later on in life?

EM: Well, it showed how terrible these Nazis were, to me. It was definitely proof that they were, to me, they were beyond being human. And of course, that's the way Hitler wanted them. They were gonna be the master race, and they were gonna conquer the world or whatever his intent was. And people believed it, you know. We went a long ways into Germany before we run into civilians, and civilians retreated with the German army. It was after we got close to the Rhine River where we started running into civilians. And the civilians were just—well, they were naturally frightened of us, because they were told that the Americans would rape these women, and after they raped them, they'd kill the women and children. And they were led to believe that. And, of course, when we took these towns, there was—I could see that we'd have the town criers go out and tell them we wanted their pistols and stuff like that turned in, and there were some of these old people that turned in their stuff to me, and they were from World War I, and of course, they knew the Americans. And they didn't hesitate to turn in their weapons and stuff. So, it was something.

MH: Are you a religious person?

EM: Yes, I'm a Catholic.

MH: Did seeing Gardelegen change any feelings about your belief in God?

EM: No, more so, stronger than ever. I didn't believe people could do these things. It was just out of this world.

MH: When did you first start talking about it?

EM: Well, it was almost fifty years later. I had all this material, you know, and nothing much—had all these pictures and stuff. And then in about 1980, they started—the Jews started talking about their ordeals, and they brought them out to the public. And, of course, that's when they wanted information, and so I sent my pictures in, and from there it took off. That was already 1980s.

MH: To come back to that day, how long did you stay at Gardelegen, at the site where the barn was?

EM: Well, we stayed in the town of Gardelegen until—it was after V-E Day, so it was probably a couple months after that we stayed before we were finally relieved and sent back to Belgium.

MH: How much time did you spend out at the site where the barn was?

EM: Oh, I imagine—I suppose I went there probably three, four days at the most. But I didn't come back to it until—well, I suppose it was in the 1980s when I took a trip over there and then we visited this area again.

MH: What did you see there?

EM: Well, we saw the cemetery, and of course, that was—Gardelegen was in the Russian zone, so the Russians had it. And it wasn't in very good shape. And, of course, all that was left was one corner of the barn that was burnt down. But it was—the people of Gardelegen that were in on this, they're very interested in this, especially me with my pictures.

MH: Was there a formal burial service for these victims?

EM: Well, I don't know if there was a formal one. Not individually, because 1,016, you know, but they did have—no doubt they had some kind of a ceremony.

MH: But nothing that the GIs went to.

EM: No, nothing that I attended.

MH: After you see this, what are the conversations like with your fellow soldiers?

EM: Well, it just makes you wonder how this could ever have happened. You know. Just unbelievable that something this horrible, you know, but there were other atrocities too you know, where there were more people killed. But not so many killed at one time. This is probably one of the largest ones where so many were killed at once. But it's—of course, that's after you see this, you know, then it gives you the feeling there's only one good German, and that's a dead one.

MH: How long did it take that feeling to go away, or hasn't it gone away?

EM: Well, it went away now. Yeah, I have different feelings about the German people now, but I still have the same feelings at that particular time, any of those involved. They certainly were just as much involved as anybody, you know, because they were fighting for the same cause.

MH: How'd you feel about the civilians?

EM: Civilians? Well—

MH: Yeah, the German civilians? They sort of stood back and let this happen.

EM: Well, that's it. We had them so blocked in, you know, they were definitely fearful, like I told you, of us that we were gonna come in and rape them and do all that stuff. And after we did all this stuff, then we'd kill them. You know, so there was only one life for them. And when we came—but they couldn't believe it after we just kept on walking by. This one woman, I know—I can't remember the name of the town, but she says, "I'm over here from the United States," and I said, "So what?" Well, she says, "I'm visiting,

and I didn't have anything to do with it." I said, "You're here, and you came for a purpose." She came there because at that time, already, the Germans were supposed to be the master race. She was gonna be one of the master race. So, I said, "You just suffer along with the rest of them. I got nothing to do with this. You're on your own."

MH: Were you married?

EM: No, not at that time.

MH: But I mean you got married after the war?

EM: Oh, yeah. Well after the war.

MH: Have children?

EM: Yeah, I got a boy and a girl. I was married in 1947.

MH: When did you tell your family about this?

EM: The family?

MH: Yes.

EM: Oh, that was actually immediately. Of course, with all these pictures and stuff, it's really available, so it was a common thing. They didn't think much of it.

MH: I'll go online and look for your photos and see if I can find them.

EM: Yeah, there's—

MH: How many are there?

EM: Well, I had about twenty, but the Minnesota Historical Society had some good ones published, and—what else? Well, they're in the museums, but we went to the one in Washington, D.C., and I didn't get a chance to get to the museum.

MH: You don't have your photos scanned on a computer, do you?

EM: No, no, I don't. I have a frame of about sixteen or seventeen pictures.

MH: How large are these?

EM: Ordinary photo size.

MH: Okay, all right. Well, I thank you very much. I probably—

EM: Now, your name is what?

MH: My name is Michael Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h. I'll send you a letter that tells you about the book I'm writing, because at some point I want to try and track down your photos and get permission to use some of them.

EM: Yeah, as a matter of fact, we got a Hirsh when I went to—when I received my liberator's certificate in Washington D.C., there was a Hirsh that was with me. I don't know if it's spelled your way or not.

MH: Yeah, I spell it H-i-r-s-h.

EM: Oh, yeah, that sounds like the same as what the fellow I knew.

MH: Okay. Well, I thank you very, very much for your time, and I'll send you a letter about the book. And I'm going to try and track down your pictures.

EM: Oh sure.

MH: Okay.

EM: Yeah, I don't know what else I could—you want any more information give you about these pictures and stuff.

MH: Well, let me find the pictures and then I'll give you the call back; it will probably take me a while.

EM: Yeah.

MH: Okay. Thank you very, very much, and have a merry Christmas and a happy new year, sir.

EM: Yes, you too.

MH: Okay.

EM: Thank you for your interest, and I'm kind of anxious to see what you have.

MH: Right, me too. (laughs)

EM: Yeah, I'm in two books already.

MH: Okay.

EM: So, you know, it's not a complete book, but they have a certain section of the book with my particular deal like an atrocity.

MH: Okay. Well, thank you again, sir.

EM: Yup, thank you for calling. Bye.

MH: Okay, bye-bye.

*End of interview*