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# Leonard Sam Parker oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 3, 2008

Leonard Sam Parker (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.]

**Michael Hirsh:** Could you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

**Leonard Parker:** Leonard, L-e-o-n-a-r-d, Sam, S-a-m, Parker, P-a-r-k-e-r.

MH: And your date of birth, sir?

LP: 16 January 1923.

MH: Okay. If we could just sort of start—tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what led you into the army.

LP: Well, I grew up in Milwaukee. I was born in Poland while my parents were en route to the United States. I was born in a barn like somebody else, you know?

MH: Mm-hm.

LP: I grew up in Milwaukee, and I ended in Minneapolis because I did my college work at the University of Minnesota. Met a young lady here and we subsequently married and I settled here in Minneapolis.

MH: Your parents were emigrating from Poland?

LP: No, they were emigrating from Russia.

MH: From Russia.

LP: And they were in Poland. I was born in a barn, like some other Jew you might remember.

MH: Okay. So, they went through the whole First World War there, then?

LP: Right.

MH: Okay. You went to the University of Minnesota?

LP: That's correct.

MH: And studied what?

LP: Architecture. I'm an architect.

MH: Okay. Did you finish college before you went into the service?

LP: No, I finished the service before I went into college.

MH: (laughs) Okay. So, how much college did you have before you ended up in the army?

LP: I had one year at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and then I went in the service, served in the infantry.

MH: You were drafted or you enlisted?

LP: I was gonna be drafted, so I enlisted; and it didn't help, 'cause I ended up in the infantry anyhow.

MH: Were you going into the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] program?

LP: I was in the ASTP program.

MH: Okay. And then they did away with it.

LP: That's right. And they sent us—it was nice while it lasted, and it introduced me to Minneapolis and I came back here to go to school after the war. I met my—the person who was to be my wife.

MH: Okay. So, once they did away with ASTP, where did they send you?

LP: They sent me to Camp Phillips, Kansas in the infantry. It was quite a change from hanging out at bars in Minneapolis to being in that godforsaken place in Camp Phillips, Kansas.

MH: Was this for basic training, or was this—?

LP: Yeah. It was for basic infantry training.

MH: Okay. And how long were you in Kansas?

LP: For six months.

MH: And then where'd they send you?

LP: Overseas to Le Havre, in France.

MH: What division were you?

LP: 45<sup>th</sup>.

MH: Okay. So, you went to Le Havre—this was then, what, 1944?

LP: Nineteen-forty-three [1943].

MH: Forty-three [1943], okay. Once you hit Le Havre, then what?

LP: I joined the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division while I was there. We fought all the way through France to the Siegfried Line into Germany.

MH: You were a rifleman?

LP: Yeah, I was a rifleman in the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

MH: Okay.

LP: 157<sup>th</sup> Regiment.

MH: And you remember your first combat experience?

LP: Uh—

MH: It was a few years ago, I know.

LP: Yeah.

MH: So, you're fighting with the 45<sup>th</sup>, and you're in Germany.

LP: That's correct.

MH: And where were you during the Battle of the Bulge?

LP: We were right on the left flank; we were in reserve. That whole thing is very vague; there was a lot of night fighting, and I can't remember what the hell went on.

MH: Okay. So, just take me from there to, you know, the—

LP: Well, we fought all the way through Nuremberg, Aschaffenburg, the liberation of the concentration camp at Dachau, and into Munich. While we were in Munich, the war ended.

MH: Right.

LP: So, then I was there on occupation for seven, eight months and came home.

MH: When you were fighting through Germany, did you have any idea about the existence of the camps?

LP: No. Well, we had heard rumors that there were concentration camps and so on, but I thought it was, you know, another one of these things of World War I where the Germans are supposed to throw babies in the air and catch them on their bayonets.

MH: Right.

LP: So, I really didn't believe it. But that was an awakening. My platoon was—I was a platoon sergeant. And my platoon was the first platoon into Dachau, so we got to see everything raw. The gas chambers—

MH: If you don't mind, tell me about that. That was April 29<sup>th</sup>, right?

LP: I can't remember the exact date, but it was towards the end of April.

MH: Okay. So, tell me—I mean, you start the morning somewhere away from Dachau. What are your orders, if you recall?

LP: We didn't have any special orders. By that time the Germans were in retreat, and we didn't have much serious combat at all. They mostly were just surrendering—giving up.

MH: Okay.

LP: As we approached Dachau, an American soldier—it was the *lager* outside of the concentration camp itself. They were so overflowed that they had built barbed wire enclosures, where they kept a lot of the prisoners. As we approached the camp, one American soldier came out, 'cause they weren't sure whether we were Germans or American troops, and he came out to check on us. When he saw that we were Americans he waved, and we were pretty soon engulfed by a whole bunch of skinny people.

MH: So you went—there was a gate you went through, or the—?

LP: No, they came out of there, of the gate. By then, the people who were supposed to be guarding the camp had run away; they'd all left. And so, there was nobody restraining the prisoners, so they came out and pretty soon we were surrounded and we were handing out chocolates.

MH: Who was the American soldier that came out?

LP: I have no idea. He was a captain. He had been captured on D-Day—the invasion—and he had been a prisoner for, I don't know, three years by the time we showed up.

MH: You remember what he looked like?

LP: I vaguely remember what he looked like, but I can't remember his name. I should have written a lot of this down. I didn't.

MH: No, I mean, did he look like he had been starved?

LP: No.

MH: No.

LP: He looked pretty good.

MH: He looked pretty good.

LP: Yeah.

MH: So, there must have been a gate that had been open, then, that the prisoners poured out of.

LP: Yup. That's right.

MH: What was it like being surrounded by these people?

LP: Well, you know, I'm Jewish—

MH: So am I, by the way.

LP: Yeah. And so, they were just—they couldn't believe that the American Army had Jewish soldiers. I was a boy cantor, so I started singing Jewish songs for them.

MH: Which songs?

LP: “Yiddishe Momme.”

MH: Okay.

LP: And “Parnasa,” which means—what, “wealth”?

MH: Okay.

LP: I was a boy cantor, so I had a lot of songs.

MH: Okay. “Oyfn Pripetshik”?

LP: “Oyfn Pripetshik.” (sings) *Brent a fayerl un in shtub is heys*. Got it?

MH: Keep going

LP: (sings) *Un der rebbe lernt kleyne kinderlekh—*

LP and MH: (sing) —*dem alef-beyz*.

LP: (sings) *Un der rebbe lernt kleyne kinderlekh dem alef-beyz*.

MH: My grandmother used to sing that to me

LP: Is that right?

MH: Yeah.

LP: (sings) *Zet zhe, kinderlekh, gedenkt'zhe tayere, voz is lernt do. Vers'vet gikher fun aykh kenen ivre der bakumt a fon. Vers'vet gikher fun aykh kenen ivre der bakumt a fon.* I understand you at least—do you understand Jewish?

MH: I understand some of it. I don't speak it; I understand some of it, though. So, you were able to speak Yiddish to these prisoners.

LP: Yeah. They couldn't believe that there was a Jewish army—a Jew in the American Army.

MH: Yeah. At the time of liberation, there were—I mean, what the statistics say is there were about 32,000 people in the camp, but only about 2,000 Jews.

LP: The camp was overflowing, so they had a lot of them in this *lager*, which was a barbed wire enclosure, and they had sentry stations all around, because the camp itself, the Dachau concentration camp, was overcrowded.

MH: Right. The people had been living in horrendous conditions, and—I mean, were you afraid of—I mean, they're filthy, they smell bad.

LP: No, that didn't—that never even—

MH: Never occurred to you?

LP: No.

MH: And there was no concern about disease?

LP: I had none. I don't know about others.

MH: Okay. So, what did you do?

LP: What do you mean?

MH: Well, I mean, you're surrounded by all these people. How do you—

LP: Well, I sang “Yiddishe Momme” for them. They couldn't believe there was a Jewish army *Unteroffizier*, 'cause I was a—three stripes up, two stripes down.

MH: Okay. And, I mean, they needed food, they needed water?

LP: Well, we had K-rations and some C-rations, and everybody just gave them whatever we had. And then the Red Cross came in after several hours and took over, and we moved on.

MH: Did you have a chance to go into the main camp?

LP: Oh, yeah.

MH: Tell me about that, in as much—

LP: It was a bunch of barracks, terribly overcrowded. They had bunks stacked three high, all of them very close together. It was outrageous living conditions. Prisoners were dying all the time. They were underfed and abused, worked hard.

MH: Did you—you went into some of these barracks?

LP: Yes, of course.

MH: Yeah? And they were all pretty much in the same condition?

LP: Yep.

MH: What about any of the other buildings? Did you go where they had a gas chamber and where the crematorium was located?

LP: We went through all of that.

MH: If it's not too painful, could you tell me about it, and what you remember seeing?

LP: Well, what they did is they would tell the people that they were gonna take a shower—and they had it set up like it was a shower room, you know, where the showerheads were actually spigots for gas. And they would take off all their clothes, and there were just stacks and mountains of clothes from people they had gassed. They had this set up—it was really an assembly line procedure there. When we came in, there were railroad spurs and there were sidecars, just stacked high. I took a whole series of pictures of this and I had them for years at home, and when I left them to go to school, my brother took over the collection and he lost them. I lost track of them. It would've been very useful for you if I still had those pictures.

MH: So, you passed the train—the thirty-nine cars, or forty cars, that were sitting there?

LP: That's correct. And they had just thrown the bodies on there to take them to the crematorium. They really had it set up on a mass-production system.

MH: What emotion goes through you when you see this?

LP: Well, it's hard to believe that people could—to be that heartless.

MH: Do you get angry?

LP: I was angry at the time. As a matter of fact, my platoon was so angry—I was the only Jew in there, in our company. But everyone was so angry that they started lining the German prisoners that we had captured, lining 'em up and shooting them. I tried to stop it, but they were—it didn't work.

MH: This was outside the camp, or inside the camp?

LP: No, it was inside the camp.

MH: They were shooting them with their rifles or with the machine guns?

LP: No, with their rifles.

MH: This—you're not talking about what happened at the coal yard. Is this something different?

LP: Yup.

MH: Okay. How many people do you think got shot that way?

LP: I have no idea.

MH: At the time—I mean, you tried to stop it by doing what?

LP: By ordering them to quit, to stop doing it. And then I had some of my—I was a platoon sergeant, so I had under my command something like forty people, divided into four squads, a weapons squad and three rifle squads. I ordered them to stop, but they were so angry at what we had seen that they just ignored me. I don't know how many Germans they shot, but there were a number that they had lined up and were shooting them.

MH: These were Germans you had discovered inside the camp?

LP: Yeah. They were all, you know, working the camp.

MH: Were they still in German uniforms, or had they put on prisoners' uniforms?

LP: No, they were in German uniforms.

MH: Okay. I'm just trying to—I mean, there were guard towers outside, around the camp.

LP: Right.

MH: At the time you got there, were there still Germans in those towers, or had they already fled?

LP: Most of them had fled.

MH: Okay.

LP: But there were still some.

MH: Okay. Were there any senior officers around when this was going on?

LP: You mean German?

MH: No, Americans.

LP: Just first lieutenants, second lieutenants. There was one captain that had been a prisoner in the camp, an American officer, but he wasn't of much use.

MH: Lieutenant Colonel [Felix] Sparks wasn't around with you, was he?

LP: That's right; he was in charge of our regiment. How do you know him?

MH: Well, I've talked to other people. I also talked to a man named Russ Weiskircher<sup>1</sup>—

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<sup>1</sup>Russel Weiskircher was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00145.

LP: I don't know him.

MH: —who was with Sparks at the time.

LP: Have you talked to Sparks?

MH: No, Sparks died.

LP: Oh. I didn't know that.

MH: Sparks died, I think, about two years ago.

LP: Okay.

MH: So, I mean—I'm just trying to figure out what the scene actually looks like.

LP: Give me your address. I wrote a letter to my mother, and I can—right after this happened, when the Red Cross came in, they moved us out of the camp. And so, I wrote a letter to my mother and I kept a copy of that. I made a number of copies, and I can send you a copy of that letter; it's a nine-page letter.

MH: Okay.

LP: It has mainly to do with—although there are other issues that I talked about, it has mainly to do with the liberation of the concentration camp.

MH: Okay.

LP: And if you give me your address, I can send you a copy of that.

MH: Okay. You want to take it down now, or when we're finished?

LP: Yeah, give me your name.

MH: Sure. It's Michael—

LP: Okay.

MH: Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h. And the address is....

LP: Okay.

MH: And let me give you my phone number, just so you have it.... How long did you stay in Dachau?

LP: Just the rest of the day, and when the Red Cross moved in, we moved outside the camp and set up for the night on a hill right outside the camp.

MH: You set up tents, or you just slept—?

LP: No. What tents are you talking about?

MH: I'm sorry. (both laugh) Sorry. And then—so you moved onto Munich, the war ended about a week later.

LP: That's correct.

MH: And you said you stayed on occupation duty for a while.

LP: For about eight months.

MH: And then, what was homecoming like?

LP: Well, I came home; it was after midnight. My parents knew I was coming home, but they didn't know exactly when, so when I showed up, it was a big surprise.

MH: You came back on a ship?

LP: Yeah, across on a ship and then from there on a train. And I ended up in a camp outside of Minneapolis and then took a train home. It was a long time from leaving Europe before I got home.

MH: Right. How long did it take you to adjust to being a civilian?

LP: Real quick.

MH: Seriously?

LP: Yeah. I didn't have a problem with that.

MH: Okay. And you went back to school immediately?

LP: They had what they called ASTP, the Army Specialized Training Program.

MH: Right.

LP: And for a while I went to University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. But I've always wanted to be an architect and they didn't have an architecture school, so then I enrolled at University of Minnesota. I came up here to school. Joined a fraternity and met a sorority girl that I subsequently married.

MH: Okay.

LP: And I've lived here ever since.

MH: You have children?

LP: Got four children.

MH: And grandchildren?

LP: Nine grandchildren.

MH: Nine grandchildren. Great-grandchildren?

LP: No great-grandchildren yet.

MH: No greats yet. Did the experience that you had at Dachau come back to you later in life at all?

LP: Well, for a few years after I got out of the service I used to have nightmares, and it wasn't just about the concentration camp. I was in an infantry company for fourteen months: you see a lot of bad things and you do a lot of bad things in that time, and it's not easy to forget. So, for—oh, I don't know; it was over a year after I got out of the service I used to have nightmares.

MH: They finally went away?

LP: Yup.

MH: And they never came back?

LP: Nope.

MH: How would you say that the—not just the experience of combat, but in particular the experience of Dachau, may have impacted your life, if at all?

LP: I'm not sure that it impacted my life, but it gave me a perspective on how badly people can behave. There's very little that you could get surprised about in terms of human behavior after that.

MH: Was your family Orthodox?

LP: They were, yeah.

MH: And what about you?

LP: I was a boy cantor: what does that tell you?

MH: Well, okay. When you see something like Dachau, does it impact the way you feel about God?

LP: No, I'm not sure I know where that takes me. But you mean to say how could he allow this to happen?

MH: There's a good start.

LP: Well, that's sort of been the history of the imperfection of man. You know, there's things that happened that are at least as bad as what happened at Dachau, and sometimes worse, if you look back in the history.

MH: But it's one thing to look back in history; it's another thing to actually see them.

LP: Well, that's true. No, that was very difficult for me to accept. For a while I thought that it was a German trait, that most people wouldn't behave that way, but I don't think that's true. There are things that have happened in other places and by other nationalities and other people that are as bad as and sometimes worse than—if that's possible—what happened in the concentration camps.

MH: In the course of working on this book—and I'm really in the early stages; I've been working on it for about four months, four and a half months—two things keep coming up. One, that it wasn't enough for the Germans to kill the Jews and everybody else, but they also had to humiliate them in the process. The other thing was that, as the war was coming to an end, the order went out that the Allies shouldn't take any of these prisoners alive and they began the death marches and the forced marches; and even leaving some of the camps, you know, they just emptied their guns into people's heads. And I'm frankly just trying to wrap my head around those two facts and try and understand how people can be that way, and I just wondered if you have any thoughts about that.

LP: No, I heard the same kind of stories, but I never witnessed anything like that, although it wouldn't surprise me if it happened. When you—I was fourteen months in combat, and you see a lot of incredibly cruel things that happen and you see a lot of suffering. After a while, I could see where people would be immune to feelings they would normally have about acting cruelly and inhumanely with others. I could see how that could happen.

MH: I spent nearly a year in Vietnam—I was an Army combat correspondent there—and I can understand, you know, in the heat of battle, doing things that later on, you're less than proud of. But I just can't relate to—you know, essentially it's all over and you're leaving, and you say, "Oh, by the way, let's kill these people."

LP: Well, there was, you know, the kind of anger—and this isn't by Jews who had witnessed other Jews being treated badly or being murdered for no reason, 'cause I was the only Jew in my company.

MH: Right.

LP: And yet, people—friends of mine, that we had been in combat together, et cetera—were so infuriated and enflamed by what we witnessed and about the cruelty that they were seeing that they did things that I'm sure they ordinarily wouldn't have done. That's been a troubling thing for me, even now, to see what, you know, the United States and the soldiers that served in the U.S. Army to do things that were as inhuman as what the Nazis did to the Jews: out of anger and what I imagine would be frustration at not being able to do anything about what had happened, and taking it out on people who probably had nothing to do directly with what had happened.

MH: I imagine some of that—that's what was going on when the guys you were with started shooting the German guards.

LP: That's exactly right.

MH: Were any people ever brought up on charges for that, or is it just—?

LP: Not that I know of.

MH: Okay. Were you wounded during the war?

LP: No. The worst I had, I got trench foot and I went back for three days. I was in a combat company, and a platoon sergeant for over eight months, and I was in the infantry for almost three years.

MH: Did you receive any combat awards?

LP: I have a Silver Star and a Bronze Star and a Good Conduct Medal. What else?

MH: I assume you have a CIB?

LP: A what?

MH: The Combat Infantryman Badge.

LP: Oh, yeah.

MH: What'd you get—

LP: I don't know where it is, but I did get one.

MH: What'd you get the Silver Star for? They don't pass those out like candy.

LP: No, I got that for what they called gallantry in action. It was at the battle for Aschaffenburg. I was a—by then I was a platoon sergeant, and my two scouts had been out in front of the—and both of them were wounded. We were attacking the city of Aschaffenburg and the whole platoon got pinned down, we couldn't move. We were out in the rain; it was a Sunday and it rained all day. And every time we moved, the Germans who were on the edge of the town—there were a bunch of houses that lined the edge of the town, and whenever you'd move they'd start shooting at you. So, I dug a hole and moved the two scouts of my platoon, dragged them into the hole so they had cover. When it turned dark, I went back to our battalion and brought people up, and we carried them back to safety. Joe Catone was one of their names, was one of the guys; he was from Brooklyn. I can't remember the other; he was a big fat guy.

MH: They both survived?

LP: They both survived. For a while we communicated, because I dug a hole and dragged them into the hole so they had some cover.

MH: You said you were pinned down by small arms fire, or artillery or mortars?

LP: Correct. Well, they were lobbing mortars into the field as well, but we couldn't move. They had—they were in houses lining the edge of the town of Aschaffenburg, and whenever we'd move they'd be firing at us. And it was Easter Sunday, a rainy day. It was an experience, for a long time I had nightmares about it.

MH: But they went away.

LP: No, we were able to—when it got dark we were able to get back to our regular lines, which were behind.

MH: No, I mean the nightmares went away eventually.

LP: Yeah. I don't have them now.

MH: Yeah, there are a lot of World War II vets who began showing signs of what they now call post-traumatic stress disorder, once they retired from their jobs. The stuff that happened in World War II began coming back up.

LP: Well, that went on with me. After when I got married, my poor wife had to put up with—I'd start yelling and screaming at night. Those are, you know, life threatening incidents, that when they come back, you don't always—your dreams don't always tell you about the way it turned out, which was not bad. But you see yourself in a different way. In any event, this went on for years where I would have, like, nightmares.

MH: Right. Were you able to get help for it, or did you just tough it out?

LP: No, I just toughed it out, and eventually it went away.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II, or did those disappear, too?

LP: No, I have some of that.

MH: If it'd be possible to get one that I could use, I'd appreciate it.

LP: Well, these are eight-and-a-half by eleven, and I'm not gonna give you that. I may have had others, but when I left home—I grew up in Milwaukee.

MH: Right.

LP: And so, my mother used to keep everything, including my letters during the war and so on.

MH: Right.

LP: But I don't know what happened to it when she passed away, and my brother didn't take good care of that.

MH: Right. But you have a photo now, though.

LP: I have a photo of myself in service, but nothing that was taken after I was in combat.

MH: Is there any way of getting a scan of the eight-and-a-half by eleven that you have?

LP: Yeah, I suppose I could.

MH: If there's a way, I'd be happy to pay for it, if—

LP: Oh, that wouldn't be necessary.

MH: If there's a way to get it scanned at 300 dpi, whoever does the scans will know how to set the scanner.

LP: Tell me that again.

MH: If they can scan it at 300 dpi. And what I need is a jpeg, j-p-g. And the other thing I'll ask you for is do you have a current photo of yourself?

LP: Well, reasonably, yeah.

MH: If I could get one of those as well—that would be terrific. I have to tell you, I've done a lot of interviews and nobody's ever sung to me before.

LP: (laughs)

MH: I thank you for that. (laughs) It's—do you sing in a synagogue choir, or do you—?

LP: No, I was a boy cantor. You know, you don't forget a lot of that.

MH: Right.

LP: And I did sing in a choir for a number of years, but not in the last—at least ten, fifteen years.

MH: Okay. The last question: did you experience any anti-Semitism when you came home?

LP: Quite honestly, I never have. I used to have regular fights when I was in the army because, you know, people would say, like, “We wouldn’t be in this goddamn mess if it weren’t for the goddamn Jews.” And so, on Saturday nights when we used to go out, I would have a fight almost every Saturday night.

MH: This is before you went overseas, I assume.

LP: Yeah.

MH: Yeah. How’d you come out in those fights?

LP: I always won. I was a Golden Gloves champ.

MH: Really?

LP: Yup.

MH: In high school or college?

LP: No, this was in Milwaukee when I was fourteen years old.

MH: Oh, okay.

LP: In novice. Hundred-and-twenty-six pounds.

MH: So, they didn't know who they were picking on—

LP: (laughs)

MH: (laughs) —until it was too late.

LP: I used to have a lot of fights when I was in the army, because there was a lot of guys saying, “We wouldn't be here except for the Jews.”

MH: Right. Okay. Well, I thank you very, very much for your time.

LP: You're very welcome.

MH: And, if you could—when you send that, if you could send me your email address I'd appreciate it.

LP: I don't have an email address.

MH: Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you said you had one at work.

LP: Now, tell me again, what do you want me to send you?

MH: You were gonna send me the letter that you wrote home to your mother.

LP: Okay.

MH: And if you were able to scan it, the World War II photo—you know, the army photo—and a current photo. And if you can scan them at 300 dpi and have them make a jpeg, j-p-g.

LP: What's j-p-g?

MH: That's the format that they'll—when they scan it, they have to save it in a certain format, and that's the format my publisher would prefer. It's a very standard format for scanning photographs. It's nothing special.

LP: Okay.

MH: Okay. I look forward to reading the letter. I'm sure it'll answer a lot of the questions that I have.

LP: Okay. Thank you.

MH: Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate it.

LP: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

***End of interview.***