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# Robert Persinger oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, October 12, 2008

Robert Persinger (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:** First of all, just so I have it right, could you give me your full name and spell it for me, please.

**Robert Persinger:** One moment, please.

MH: Sure.

RP: Let me ask you, sir, why are you writing this book?

*Pause in recording*

MH: Your name is Robert Persinger, P-e-r-s-i-n-g-e-r?

RP: That's correct. Yes.

MH: You live at....

RP: Correct.

MH: Your phone number is.... Your email address is....

RP: That's correct.

MH: You were with the 80<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] Division.

RP: No.

MH: No?

RP: 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry. 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry.

MH: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry.

RP: We were just doing reconnaissance for the 80<sup>th</sup> Division. They were about forty miles behind us when we got into Ebensee.

MH: Okay, and you were at Ebensee. Tell me, where were you—what's your date of birth, before I forget?

RP: September 29, 1923.

MH: Nineteen twenty-three. When did you go in the Army?

RP: March 1943.

MH: You were drafted or you enlisted?

RP: Drafted.

MH: Drafted. Where'd they send you?

RP: Camp Gordon, Georgia. That's where I had my basic training, and then my Tennessee maneuvers, firing on the ranges at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

MH: And when did they finally—what unit were you in—did you go overseas with a unit or as a replacement?

RP: Sure, I did.

MH: What unit did you go over with?

RP: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, reconnaissance squadron.

MH: And was it part of a division at the time?

RP: No, no, no. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry is a very old cavalry regiment, organized in 1846, and it's been that way since then. They are now completing their third term in Iraq.

MH: Okay. So, when did they finally send you over to Europe?

RP: We got to Europe—we left in July of forty-four [1944].

MH: In July of forty-four [1944]. And you went where?

RP: Liverpool, England, then down to—I'm trying to think—where we all took off for the Channel, across the English Channel. I can't think of it. That big city where—the ones that took off for D-Day, it's the same city. I'm trying to think of the name of the town, so you should know it as well as me.

MH: I'll find it. Where did you land in Europe?

RP: At Utah Beach.

MH: And you went over with your tanks?

RP: Yes.

MH: What's that experience like, unloading a tank onto a beach?

RP: Just driving it off. It was no problem at all.

MH: Oh, okay.

RP: Yeah. The tide was out.

MH: Take me through what happens to you in the early part of the war for you.

RP: Well, the Battle of Saint-Lô was just finishing, and we went in with [George S.] Patton, General Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and joined that. Thirty-nine days later, after firefights here and there and chasing the Germans, we were in Metz, France, where we met heavy resistance. As you know, the Battle of Metz took about two months, so we were involved in that. Then we got in behind the Siegfried Line, and then shortly after that, we had D-Day—er, the Battle of the Bulge.

MH: The Battle of the Bulge.

RP: Yes. December 16.

MH: What was that like for you personally?

RP: Well, it was combat, and we had to experience that. It was a continuation of the very same thing we'd been involved in for those thirty-nine days prior, or forty, before we got to Metz—after we got to Metz. Of course, it was very cold. It started turning cold, and of course the Germans were advancing with heavy artillery. We were lucky to be able to defend our positions, and we, of course, were driven back. But it was a trying time.

MH: What vehicle were you in at the time?

RP: I was in an M24 tank.

MH: Were you wounded during the Bulge?

RP: Yeah, I had shrapnel wounds, nothing serious. It was just a deep wound in the back of my hand, and then a scratch on my side and that was it. It was from a mortar shell.

MH: What was your rank at the time?

RP: Let's see, I was a platoon sergeant, a staff sergeant.

MH: Staff sergeant. At that point, did you know anything about concentration camps?

RP: No.

MH: Nothing?

RP: Not then. We were involved in too much other stuff. And, of course, we weren't near a concentration camp then.

MH: I know we're going to talk about Ebensee, but did you see any of the others or any of the death marches?

RP: No.

MH: Nothing. So, tell me the story of Ebensee and how you came upon it.

RP: Well, we were—we had been in the town of Gmunden; I guess that's the way you pronounce it. It's on the north end of a lake there in Austria, and on the south end was the

town of Ebensee, fifteen miles south. And we were given the mission that day to enter Ebensee and outpost and hold it until the end of the war. We knew that the end of the war was near, because the Germans had been surrendering in droves to us. So, the civilians told—in the memories of our A Troop—that was the reconnaissance troop we were working with—that there was a concentration camp up in the mountains, a little higher up. So, two and a half miles up, there it was: this concentration camp.

MH: How many tanks went up there?

RP: Mine and another in my section. Two tanks, my tank and another tank. I was a platoon sergeant, and it was my section of the platoon that went up there.

MH: So, it's about ten men?

RP: Yes. We had two tank crews and I was the tank commander of my tank. There was another gentleman by the name of Dick Pomante, who was the tank commander of the other.

MH: Pimonte?

RP: Pomante. P-o-m-a-n-t-e.

MH: And you're going up a road or you're making—

RP: Oh, yes, it was a gravel road up there.

MH: What do you see? You're going up in daylight, right?

RP: Yes.

MH: What kind of day is this?

RP: We got up there about ten [minutes] to three. It was a Sunday afternoon, just like today: a nice, beautiful Sunday.

MH: So, you go up this gravel road in the tank, and what do you see? Are you riding inside the tank or on top?

RP: No, I'm inside the tank, in the turret. Well, we saw—you could smell the smell of death all over, and when we got close, that's when—100 yards away. We looked down and made a right-hand turn into this road that led up—it made a turn, and there, 100 feet, 200 feet away, was this concentration camp. There were people standing behind the barbed wire fences and the two towers there that were used for the entrance and guarding the gate.

MH: Was the gate open or closed?

RP: The gate was closed at the time, but they opened it for us to drive in.

MH: So, the Germans had gone already.

RP: Oh, yes, the Germans had left the day before, on Saturday. The SS had left.

MH: Tell me what you see. You get out of the tank?

RP: Eventually, yes. We saw people—well, you've seen pictures, I'm sure—

MH: Of course.

RP: —of concentration camps, and that's exactly what we saw: people standing in mud behind that fence with no clothes and some with clothes, and some with the tops and some with the bottoms. And, of course, they were so thrilled to know that they were going to be free. So, it was a terrible sight, as far as something to see. It was terrible.

MH: You were about a twenty-two-year-old kid at the time.

RP: Yes.

MH: How do you deal with it?

RP: Like you do with anything. As the same way all of your life, you deal with it. You mean, at that time? How did we deal with it?

MH: Yeah, at the time. How do you cope with what you're seeing? You're seeing something you probably couldn't even imagine.

RP: I saw things that I couldn't imagine on the way to getting there, so it wasn't too much out of line. I guess if that's what you're asking, of course, it was horrible, terrible sights. But we had been used to seeing horrible sights. We were combat veterans, I guess you would call us at that time. We had been with Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, and if you know what they—history tells you what they done, so we were part of it.

MH: I understand.

RP: Yes, it was tough.

MH: So, what do you do?

RP: Well, our mission was to go up there and see if there was any resistance. And there was none, so we didn't have no reason to stay there. Simply, all we had to do was see what was there. I called the lieutenant, and I told him what was there—my platoon leader. And in the meantime, those people wanted us to get down and dismount off our vehicles, and we finally did.

MH: They called to you? They were speaking—

RP: No, nobody speaking any English. They were all foreigners to us. I don't think—there was only a couple of our guys could speak anything but English, outside of some Polish boys that was in our tank crews.

MH: You dismounted from the tank.

RP: Yes.

MH: Did it make you nervous to do that?

RP: I don't—well, you ask me “nervous.” It was—of course. I was not nervous, no. We knew we were getting into a bunch of filthy human beings with ribs showing, at sixty, sixty-five pounds, and they were full of lice and fleas and sores and everything else. Of course, we didn't know, really, how bad, but we heard later that they were loaded with fleas from typhoid fever. And they, of course, were all over us. They hugged us, and doing everything like that. So, it was—

MH: That's sort of what I was getting at. That sort of thing.

RP: It was hard to put up with, very hard, just that alone. But then walking amongst the dead bodies and seeing them, seeing the dead bodies piled around the crematorium and then into the crematorium, things like that was what was making you feel much worse than looking at those poor people that didn't have no garments or starving to death. So, you felt sorry for them, and you sure felt sorry for all those dead people that you were looking at.

MH: Were you a religious person?

RP: Well, I was Protestant, and I believe in Jesus Christ, and still do. And the Holy Father, of course.

MH: When you find yourself in a situation such as you saw with all the dead people and those who survived, is that a moment for prayer, or not?

RP: Yes, it certainly was. Yes, it was, before and then when we saw them, and since then, for all of those poor people.

MH: You walk through the camp. You saw the crematorium. Did you go into any of the other buildings?

RP: Yes, we walked into the barracks.

MH: What were they like?

RP: Terrible, absolutely terrible. There were people lying in the barracks that would probably be more than half-dead, because their eyes never made contact with you at all. So, those folks were in very bad shape. Of course, [there were] some alive, too, in there. Horrible place.

MH: You got on the radio, you said, to the lieutenant and told him what you'd found. Was there any indication at that point how long it would take to get help?

RP: Well, I simply—he told me, “Make sure you keep track with anybody up there who can speak English, and stay right where you are. We'll be up there very shortly,” and so they did. The rest of the platoon came up. Yes, and then we—it was obvious that folks needed food. That's what it was.

MH: Did you stay there until they got food and medical help?

RP: Oh, yes, we stayed there for about a week and a half.

MH: Really?

RP: Yes. We helped feed them. All the Army units, as far as 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, started gathering food wherever they could get it, and the next day, we served them a soup that was made up by all the vegetables and things we retrieved that day. So, it was a terrible time. But just a few people out of that 18,000 had a nice meal that Sunday evening.

MH: There were 18,000 in Ebensee?

RP: Eighteen thousand and four hundred people in a camp up in the mountains with no—there was no open fields or nothing like this. This is up in the mountains, up where there was pine trees, and that was all—and very small openings, but pine trees were all over the place.

MH: Pine trees were in the camp?

RP: Mm-hm. And there was a roll call square area, which we drove into and parked our tanks. But the rest was just a muddy mess, what you found.

MH: Did you ever find anybody who spoke English?

RP: Yes, they found a man that did speak English. Yes.

MH: What did he tell you?

RP: He's the one that convinced us to get off the tanks and take a walk. He'd show us the camp, and that's who we followed. So, it was a horrible experience, but I guess it helped us a lot to know that the war was ended on the eighth of May, and we were so relieved. Our shoulders—a big load came off, and so on. That probably helped us a little bit in forgetting that camp, just to know that we would be free again and we weren't going to be fighting.

MH: The experience you had in the camp, where you had a chance to—you spent a week and were helping feed people—I mean, it's—

RP: We fed them the first day. Then, after that, the quartermaster units came in, and we didn't have nothing to do with it.

MH: But, I mean, you'd been in combat, heavy combat, until then.

RP: At times, we were, yes. We'd done a lot of reconnaissance.

MH: And this is a different kind of experience. This is a saving-life experience.

RP: Yes, true.

MH: Did that cross your mind at the time, what a big difference it was to be saving lives?

RP: Oh, of course. Yes, yes, we were very glad we did finally find them. Of course we didn't know we were going to find them that May 6, that morning. We had no idea we were going to be up at a concentration camp at three o'clock the following afternoon.

MH: Right. When did you finally come back to the U.S.?

RP: Got back to the States in July of 1945. We were going—General Patton had got us all together, and he told us he was going to get us home for thirty-day furloughs, and after the furloughs, he would be glad to take us into Japan.

MH: Which, fortunately, wasn't necessary.

RP: That's right. Thank goodness for both of those atomic bombs. It saved all of so many American lives.

MH: Right.

RP: So, we were relieved, and then I got discharged October 29, 1945, in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

MH: Where did you go home to?

RP: Morengo, Illinois.

MH: Morengo?

RP: Mm-hm.

MH: You weren't married at the time, were you?

RP: No, no, no. I didn't get married until 1950.

MH: Did you tell people back home what you'd seen at Ebensee?

RP: Oh, I told a few people, but they'd heard so much bad news and all of that. World War II was so horrible compared to what we have now that the people were glad just to see us back. And I guess we were so thankful to be home, just to be on furlough and away from it all. People—I didn't tell many people. My parents—or my mother, not my parents; my father was gone long before I even went into the service. He passed away in 1939.

MH: What did you do when you came home? What was your work?

RP: Oh, when I came home, I could've went back to a little factory, and I didn't choose to do that. I chose to work with a man that I knew, who was a good friend of the family, who owned a Shell distributorship with a lot of activity and needed a lot of help. So, I was willing to try and work for him, and I did. That was until 1953 I worked for him. He was a wonderful man. That was the type of work I done, working with petroleum products, even delivering petroleum products to farmers in the town of Morengo, a farm area. And I married my wife in 1950.

MH: And children?

RP: I have three children, one boy and two girls.

MH: Except when people like me call you and ask these questions, does what you saw at Ebensee come up, or is it just generally what you saw in the war?

RP: It comes up, of course. I think of that lots of times. And I don't mention that, of course, but I never—I never let it bother me like it could, I suppose.

MH: Right. Okay. Anything else that I should've asked you that I didn't?

RP: Well, just one thing: we have met many an ex-prisoner, and also grandchildren of ex-prisoners. I'm having one Monday, tomorrow, coming from Toronto, Canada. He's a grandson of an ex-prisoner. He just wants to come and talk to me. We've met a lot through our Army reunions; we've always had quite a few of the ex-prisoners come to our reunions, and they are recognized. They get to talk and tell their stories, the ones that do come to our reunion. We just had some in Elk Grove this fall, this last September, and we had a reunion. We had some there then, too, and had a grandson of one.

So, I guess that'll live on and on. And I've been invited back to Austria to tell the story of how it was. They always have memorial ceremonies on May 6 every year, and I have been involved a lot. I've invited back, like I say, to Austria.

MH: Did you go back?

RP: Oh, yes. I've been back to Ebensee three times. People in Stockholm, an ex-prisoner who lives there—I got involved with an invitation to Stockholm to go back to Sweden to tell my story. I've been to San Diego, California, Los Angeles at the 1035 Club and spoke there in Beverly Hills and spoke there in 2005, to tell the story. There's so many things involved here. It's just a story that should never be forgotten.

MH: Have you written the story down?

RP: Have I written the story?

MH: Yeah.

RP: No. I've written my—they know my story, of course. I've gotten it written down, and my family all knows about it, but I have never—I possibly could've written a book on all of this.

MH: No, what I mean is, since you've done a number of speeches, is it something you've written or you just talk?

RP: I just talk and answer questions, and that's basically it. I would tell my story about that, more complete than what I have to you today.

MH: Have you ever recorded any of those speeches?

RP: Have I recorded them?

MH: Yes.

RP: No. No, really—yes, I guess I have, too. Here in Rockford, the city of Rockford, there've been places where I've told my story.

MH: I just wonder if there's more details about Ebensee that you've told that we haven't talked about today.

RP: Golly. No. There's been a lot of people, of course, saying, "We were the first there." But I know we were the first two tanks there into the place, so I guess that's about—we drove in and got off the tanks and walked in. I know that was one of the most horrible things that I've ever had to do. And looking back on it, I'm glad I did get a chance to see it as long as we were there. We had heard in the last two weeks of the war, we'd heard about some concentration camps, and we all said, well, we hope we never run into one of them. Little did we know.

On the fifth of May we did have resistance. We run into some Germans, Hungarians. We got in a firefight with them, and we had one of our tanks knocked out and two men killed. The crew was severely injured, the remainder, and that was the day before, on the fifth. So, we knew it was just a terrible thing, and we were so glad the war was over. And that was the last two people that were wounded or killed, on the fifth of May, of our regiment.

MH: When you see a place like Ebensee, one of the things that I've run into in reading and in talking to people is that the Germans were intent on—they didn't want any of the prisoners to fall—any of their prisoners—to fall into the Allied hands.

RP: They didn't want nobody into the Russians. Allied hands, they surrendered to us in droves.

MH: Right, but they didn't want the concentration camp prisoners to be found alive.

RP: Well, that's true. Yes, they had plans on blowing up the tunnels they were in.

MH: I find it hard to imagine what kind of people do that. They know they've lost the war, and they've got to keep killing until the last possible minute.

RP: Well, the SS, as you know if you've studied them, life didn't mean—they were so wicked and cruel. That's all they'd been taught. Something like we have now with the other—our terrorists that's coming up today, it's the very same thing. They don't think anything of life. They were so glad to do what they were doing. To them, it was a pleasure. It had to be, because nobody else could stand to do such a terrible thing. Believe me, it was terrible.

MH: I understand. Do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

RP: Yeah.

MH: If I send you an envelope—

RP: I can send you a picture, I guess.

MH: What I'd like is a picture of you then and a picture of you today.

RP: Well, eighty-five years makes quite a difference. I was twenty-two, twenty-three, when I got out of the service. But I'm thankful to live as long as I have, and I've enjoyed my life and my wonderful family. And that's my greatest, greatest, greatest asset, my family and my wife.

MH: What's your wife's name?

RP: Arlene.

MH: Arlene? A-r-l-e-n-e?

RP: Right.

MH: If I put a photo envelope in the mail to you, if you could send me a couple of pictures, I'll copy them on the computer and send them back to you.

RP: Well, let's see. I can do that.

MH: Okay. I'll send that to you. I thank you very much. I know it's difficult to talk about these things.

RP: Oh, it's not that bad, because it's a lot easier now than it was then, much easier than it was as the years have gone by.

MH: Okay. Do you have any articles that have been written about your appearances?

RP: Yes, I think I still have.

MH: If you could—when I send the envelope to you, if you could send me a copy of those, I'd like to read them.

RP: I made the *Los Angeles Times*, the front page of that, I guess, when I went out there.<sup>1</sup>

MH: Oh, okay.

RP: That's about what I have.

MH: If you could make a copy—if you could copy it, I'd appreciate it. Okay?

RP: I'll see what I can do for you, sir.

MH: All right. Thank you very, very much. I really appreciate your time.

RP: Of course, I don't have your mailing address.

MH: I'm going to send it to you.

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<sup>1</sup> The article, "Nazi Camp Survivors, Ex-GI, Celebrate Anew," by Tony Perry, appeared in the March 6, 2006 edition. As of 2010, it can be read online at the *Los Angeles Times* website.

RP: Oh, okay.

MH: In fact—well, I'll email it to you, but I'll send you an envelope in the mail. Okay?

RP: Okay.

MH: All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Persinger.

RP: You're welcome.

MH: I appreciate it. Bye-bye.

***Pause in recording***

RP: But not far down the street was this bakery where it was refused. That bakery refused to give him anything. And he went and got his tank and his crew—

MH: (laughs)

RP: —and he drove down in front of it and said, “Now, what're you gonna do?”

MH: Mr. Persinger, what—the notion that there were 18,000 people in the camp—

RP: Eighteen thousand four hundred and some.

MH: How do you—I mean, the audacity of saying, “We're gonna make soup, and we're going to try and feed these people—”

RP: No, we knew that we could feed a few, because remember, half of them were ambulatory, and the other—we just knew that they wouldn't be able to—that we wouldn't be able to feed all those people.

MH: But, I mean, just going in there with as much as you could make, I'd be shocked if you could feed 1,000 people.

RP: Well, no, I think—I don't know what we fed. I really can't tell you that night what we did. We had an awful lot of it, because we had a lot of those kettles boiling over with soup.

MH: Where were you cooking it? In the town and bringing it up?

RP: No, no, no. Up there in the camp; we built fires under it.

MH: Oh, okay. It's almost like—you know, it's American GIs saying, "We're gonna do something."

RP: Oh, yeah. Well, that's the way we did it. That's true.

MH: I try to compare it, for example, when they came in after Katrina, the hurricane in New Orleans, and the job they had of trying to feed thousands and thousands of people. And they also had—I mean, you had thousands of military guys and civilians and everything else to try it. And how many people were in your tank outfit that was at Ebensee?

RP: It was eighty-eight of us in our company. Eighty-eight men.

MH: Eighty-eight men. How long did it take before the Army caught up with you and had medics and—

RP: Well, the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which is the division that we were doing reconnaissance for—in other words, we crossed the Inn River, and that's Hitler's Braunau, Austria, and we were doing reconnaissance for them, because they were still way behind. But that's where we were, and they just followed us. The day we went in the camp, they were forty miles behind us yet. So, that's the kind of reconnaissance work we done. We done that all through the war. We just—cavalry is the outfit—

You just gotta remember, there are only 1,550 of us in the two cavalry squadrons, and 1,500 enlisted men and fifty-five officers composed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry mechanized cavalry

group, or two. Today, it's about 8,000 men—not quite—with all the Air Force, helicopters and all of that that they got. And they're in Iraq today for the third time. Anyway, it's a beautiful old cavalry outfit, and I was very proud to serve in such a wonderful, wonderful unit, and it's just that today. And it's just—it's unbelievable.

The American people don't know what we really got. We just don't know what we have. The Army is so strong, and all of them in the Army are amazing, amazing people, I'll tell you. That's kind of like we were, because—you know, we were drafted, but everyone went because we all wanted to win World War II. We all knew we had to win that war. So, everybody went, and if you didn't, you were a draft dodger and you were looked down upon. You didn't hardly dare walk outside of your house. Anyway, that's the way it was back then, when America was America, not what it is today. It's a shame. I've said enough about that, I guess, but, boy, I have my opinions.

MH: Yes.

RP: Just because of what we'd done. What I think—we had a part in saving this United States of America, and I know we did. And General Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army had a big part. And we were all dedicated soldiers because we had to become soldiers. No ifs, ands, buts or nothing about it.

MH: That was a war that had to be won.

RP: Yeah. You were exposed to it all.

MH: Okay. I thank you very much for calling me back.

RP: Okay. (laughs)

MH: And I probably will be in touch again as I start writing and have a couple more questions.

RP: Yeah. And then there's—what's her name? Erwin? No, Elvin, the lady that gets—I think she's the lady that—

MH: Oh, that I met at the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division?

RP: Yes, yes.

MH: Jan Elkins, I think. Jan—

RP: Jan Elvin, E-l-v-i-n. Elvin.<sup>2</sup>

MH: Yeah. Right.

RP: You see, her husband got to Ebensee about a month later. That's what she tells me. Again, it was the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I told you that they were behind. The guys—well, that's just the way they were. It was a good division; it was nothing wrong with that.

But we were trying to meet the Russians at the Elbe River. The Germans had been surrendering to us in droves about three days before that ever happened, and I don't know—I'm sure the SS from that camp saw us. We must've met them, because they didn't want to get captured by the Russians. They were trying anything to escape the Russians. So we just let them go, and that's the way it was. Terrible, terrible SS men. If we'd known that group was in that bunch, we probably would've got them, if we'd known what we were gonna run into, because that was a horrible, horrible mess. It's just something that's—like I say, that's glued in my memory.

MH: You guys did an amazing job. Thank you again very much.

RP: Well, and the time ever comes, you get your book ready—

MH: I will make sure you will be getting a copy.

RP: Thank you kindly.

MH: Take care, sir.

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Elvin is the author of *The Box from Braunau: In Search of My Father's War* (AMACOM, 2009), a book about her father, Bill Elvin, who was in the 80<sup>th</sup> Division.

RP: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

*End of interview*