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Max R. Schmidt oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 21, 2008

Max R. Schmidt (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.]

MH: Why don't you give me your full name and spell it for me, please.

MS: My full name is Max, middle initial R. for Richard, and my last name is Schmidt. S-c-h-m-i-d-t.

MH: And your address?

MS: ...

MH: Phone number?

MS: My phone number is....

MH: And your date of birth.

MS: My date of birth is June 28, 1926.

MH: And the unit you were in.

MS: I was assigned after basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama for fifteen weeks and then I had to—we left there. I had a seven-day delay en route until I got up to Boston—Boston, sailing to Europe on March 1 [1945].

MH: You're in the 80th Infantry.

MS: I'm in the 80th Infantry. I was assigned to the 80th Infantry Division once I got over into Europe.

MH: And you—

MS: What's that?

MH: You got to Buchenwald.

MS: Yes, yes.

MH: That's just for the transcribers.

MS: Oh, I see. Okay. Well, I don't—I was in the 80th prior to getting into Buchenwald, I joined them in Germany. I missed the Battle of the Bulge. So, thank God for that, because frankly, I wouldn't be here today interviewing with you.

MH: Where'd you grow up?

MS: I grew up in Queens and Brooklyn, New York.

MH: And what were you doing before you went in the Army?

MS: Well, I was in school. I was able to finish high school and I finished in June, they drafted me in August, and—no, in October. I'm sorry, in October. And I took my basic

training, as I said, in Fort McClellan, Alabama, and then I finished that and I got a delay en route to go home for four days before I had to report to Boston to get on the ship to go over.

MH: So you went over in—

MS: I left Boston March 1, 1945. Okay, so I got over into—from there, we sailed into Liverpool, and from Liverpool, we boarded busses to Southampton. Southampton, we crossed the canal into Le Havre, then we got on boxcars and right up to the front.

MH: You were there for just the last two months of the war.

MS: That's right, yes, yes, yes. And don't ask me—when we got into Germany, some point in Germany, we knew we were going to the front, and we stopped at some town that had just been taken by the unit. And let me say this to you, that when we got there, we all got out of the truck, and as we were proceeding in that town, we'd seen some dead animals. Of course, the town was just taken, and some Germans were still laying on the side of the streets and so forth. And we got off the truck and we started to walk to report to our squads, and there I seen for the first time a body laying on the side of the street. It had an olive green blanket over it and combat boots sticking out, and I said, "Uh-oh, that's one of ours." And I said—you know, since I was a replacement, I says, "Jeesh, maybe I'm here to replace him. I wonder who might be replacing me before this is over." I mean, as an eighteen-year-old kid, so you know, I didn't—so anyway, we took several towns after that and we got to the Rhine River and we crossed the Rhine. I crossed the Rhine on March 29. Most of our unit was—Company G crossed originally on the twenty-eighth of March.

MH: Was Company G [in the] 317th?

MS: Infantry Regiment, yeah. And then we crossed and got over on the other side, and there was a lot of shelling going on at the time: we were shelling castles and we did quite a bit of shelling on that, into Germany. We got on the other side, finally, and we then got into our units again and advanced through Germany as best we can. Don't ask me what different towns we were in or anything. And then we got to Weimar. I was in a heavy wooded area; we were going through a heavy wooded area when they would start shelling us. And that's when I, you know, got some shrapnel—not shrapnel but tree debris that just—in my leg, cut in my leg.

MH: From the burst?

MS: Yeah, from the burst: once they hit the trees, they splinter everything that's around it because it throws, and that's what they were attempting to do. They knew we were there and they were doing it. But after that, they patched me up and I went on my way and no problem. But we—our original unit got into Weimar on the eleventh [of April], we got to Weimar. I finally got there on the twelfth, the day after. But fortunately, Weimar was declared what they said, an open city. In other words, there was no real fighting to get to take Weimar; in other words, liberating Weimar, there was no real fighting going on. The Germans surrendered the SS troops that were in the Buchenwald concentration camps; they took off. And when you got close to it, you could know there was something wrong, because you could smell it in the air. You could smell stinking bodies, basically, you could smell—

MH: Did you know what the smell was?

MS: No, we did not know. But that—my only opinion is that I feel that that was the key, to us. That's why the Germans had it declared an open city, they didn't want to fight. They came to us, they came to our commanders and wanted to surrender because they knew. They knew once we got into Weimar what we'd find, and that would be Buchenwald. And sure enough, it was the concentration camp. After that, we—my company was continuously moving. I did see piles and piles of rifles, weapons and all kinds of weapons that was put in the middle of the street.

MH: In Weimar.

MS: In Weimar, because that's when our general said, got a hold of the *Bürgermeister* and he said, "Everyone that has any weapons at all, put 'em in the street and get 'em here immediately," because he had already found out that Weimar had the concentration camp Buchenwald. And so, we liberated Buchenwald. I wasn't able to stay there.

MH: Did you go into the camp?

MS: Well, I just passed it. I seen things I didn't want to see, but nevertheless, that was part of it. I called it barracks, but they weren't barracks; they were just little buildings that they kept all the prisoners in. And of course there were some prisoners there like skin and bones, of course, as you know. And you've probably seen that on history channels and so forth. But I didn't get a chance to stay there, but we went—we continued on and went to Erfurt and so on.

And then I had the opportunity—for the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, we went back to Germany and we toured these places that we were in. And at that time, when we got there, we made a stop at Weimar, and when we got there, the gates were closed. They did not know we were coming. We went through a touring agent, and when we got there the gates were closed, the bus arrived and we couldn't get in. And I noticed that there was someone in the office—one of the buildings that was the SS troop's office at one time. And when we got there, a couple—myself and a couple of other guys knocked on the door, and there was someone in there at the desk, and he opened the door. It was a German, and we told him who we were. And he seen the bus coming. So, we told him as best we could that we wanted to go in there and check out the place again, and he said “Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, *nein, nein*, cannot do, cannot do.” And we said, “Oh yes, you can do, because we're the ones that were here. You better do, or we're gonna break the goddamn door down.”

MH: (laughs) (inaudible)

MS: So, finally he said to us, he says, “If we had known that you were coming, we just had the press here that afternoon,” television and video and all that kind of stuff, because he's writing the history of what went on at Weimar. So, he did open the gate and we were able to go in, all the ovens and everything were still intact—which was part of the agreement, that they would not destroy that. In fact, they're still there. You can go over there where they operated and took the gold from the mouth in the teeth and all that kind of stuff. It's still there, because we went back and I viewed it with my video camera at that time. So, that's basically what it was. But—

MH: When you continued on past Buchenwald, did you go to any of the other camps?

MS: Oh, no, no, there was another camp. I believe it was Gotha. It was in Gotha.

MH: Ohrdruf?

MS: Ohrdruf, yeah, that's right. I didn't get there. We were still on the move because we had quite a bit of firing, you know, combat with the Germans beyond that, because we were on their home territory and whatever they had, they were determined to—

MH: They were pretty much on the run by then.

MS: Well, yeah, they were on the run, but nevertheless they had what they called the “home Wehrmacht,” the young kids and so forth—yeah, sixteen, seventeen years old. I was eighteen, but they were younger than me. So, anyway, we continued on and took various other towns after that. And I finally wound up—oh, I guess it was in late April, near the end of the war, because the war ended May 8, and in late April they found out when the war was coming to the end. They transferred me from my company to the service—not the service department, the headquarters—because they found out when they checked my qualifications, they knew I could type, they knew I knew bookkeeping, I did this. So, they made me a company clerk at headquarters.

So, when I got there, I said to the sergeant major who greeted me—and I had my belt on, I had my ammunition, two hand grenades hanging from you; that’s the way it was—and I went in to him and I said, “Sergeant, Private Max Schmidt”—PFC; I was made a PFC by that time—“PFC reporting for duty.” He says, “Oh, yes, we’ve been waiting for you. We lost one man and we found that you could replace him by your record.” And I said, “Why the hell didn’t you guys find that out before I got on the line?” You know, kidding with them.

But anyway, that was my story, and then of course we continued on from there. We wound up in Füssen, where the castle of—the one that is, the duplicate, the one in Florida—the castle in Florida, Mickey Mouse, Neuschwanstein. Yeah, that one in Florida from Disney World is a copy of Neuschwanstein. And we were in Füssen where Neuschwanstein is, and we went to a quite a few other places. And as they started then to, we went to Oberammergau, we went to Buchenwald—not Buchenwald, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and Oberammergau is when they started to start sending the fellows home, to go home. And of course at that time it was on a point system, how many points you had.

MH: You couldn’t have had very many.

MS: No. Some of the guys in our outfit were eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five. I had twenty-nine. So I said to myself, boy, how long am I going to stay here at the rate we’re going? But I finally spent eighteen months over there before I got home. I got home then in August of 1946.

MH: What’d you do then?

MS: As I say, I was a company clerk for the 80th until they deactivated, and then they sent me over to the 9th Infantry Division.

MH: Once you got out of the service, what'd you do?

MS: Oh, when I went out of the service, I went back home—and I had a part-time job before I got into the service. And at that time, the government promised that if you had a job, a full-time job, you could go back to it when you came home. And they kept that honor and I went to work for the company that I left. So, I kept on then, from there on I went to school, back to school three nights a week to have some more studies, and I got involved in transportation at that time. I got my license to practice law before the Interstate Commerce Commission. I don't know if you're familiar with—yeah.

MH: Where'd you go to law school?

MS: Well, it wasn't law school; it was a private school that strictly taught transportation law.

MH: I didn't know that.

MS: Yeah. It was in New York, and I finished that and I stayed with the company and then later on transferred to another company after I had my—call it a degree if you want, but it really wasn't a degree, it was a diploma. I'm not trying to blow this thing up. And I got married in June of 1947. I got discharged in August of forty-six [1946] and my sweetheart, who is now my wife, waited for me to come home, we got married. We both lived in Queens and Brooklyn. I knew her from our church groups and so forth. So, it worked out real fine, it worked out great for me.

MH: Does what you saw in Buchenwald ever come back to you?

MS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it does. When you see something like that, I guess you never forget it.

MH: Do you ever speak to school groups or that sort of thing?

MS: I do once in a while; I do back in Greensboro. I spoke to—I belong to a lot of veterans' groups, not just this one. I'm a past commander, you can see, and very active. I don't know how many years with these people, but I've got sixty-two years with the American Legion. I joined the American Legion as soon as I was discharged. And when

I went to Greensboro, I joined the VFW. I'm a lifetime member with the VFW, a lifetime member with the DAV, I'm a member of the AMVETS, I have the 80th Division. So, you see, I've been very active.

MH: You're either buying or selling a lot of poppies.

MS: Well, yeah, I give 'em away and someone will give you a donation for it. But that's another thing, now that you mention it. You'd be surprised, when we're in front of a department store or say a supermarket handing out poppies, you don't ask for money, you just hand 'em out, and if they'd like to contribute, they will. How many men will come up to you and say, "Yes, I wouldn't pass you guys up." And I'd ask why, and he'd say, "Well, my father was in World War II." And you'd be surprised how many times some guys would drop a ten or a twenty dollar bill in that box. So, it's still—it's in with the older people, but if you go to schools today, they really don't know what the hell happened in World War II. And I've had class, I spoke to a class—fellas in my VFW, they asked us if we could supply them with someone who was in the European Theater and someone who was in the Pacific Theater. Unfortunately, we (inaudible)—so I went for European and one of my buddies went for the Pacific. And we addressed a senior—I'm not going to tell you what school it was, though—just a senior history class, and we both spelled it all out to them what we experienced and so forth. And do you know, some of those young men and women there in that history class didn't even know who all three nations were that we were fighting against? Now, that's sad. That's sad.

MH: They know who Hitler was?

MS: They knew Hitler, they knew Germany, some of them knew Japan because of the Hiroshima and the attack on Pearl Harbor. But there were very few that even knew Italy was one of our enemies. You know? And this is what's happening. Today, it's getting more and more, because schools are not teaching anymore.

MH: Or it's a paragraph in a book.

MS: Yeah. Yeah. That's basically what it is. It's a sad situation. Because—but I've got now, I have three grown sons—they're both married—all three of them are married, each one has two girls, two girls, two boys. And we just came back, my wife and I just came back from Luxembourg back in June. We went over there because the 80th Division is invited over there, every year for about the last fifteen years. The people of Luxembourg open up their doors and welcome us every single year; they take us to all these places that were liberated by the 80th Division, and so forth. It's just a marvelous thing. And my three sons flew over there to be with us, because I was receiving an award—not that I

was in Luxembourg during [the] Battle of the Bulge. But those people feel that you got the Germans out of Luxembourg and you chased them back into their own country, and they are very, very grateful to the American soldiers. And yet in this country, when we go on a parade, we go in a parade and we're carrying the American flag in our VFW or the (inaudible), whatever it might be, you'd be surprised how many people don't even salute the flag when it goes by. So it's getting sad.

MH: Maybe with the new generation of soldiers coming back, it will change.

MS: Ah, I hope so.

MH: But I hate to think we have to go to war in order to get it to change.

MS: Yeah. How many people greet the guys coming back now? I send gifts, and so does our veterans group, sends gifts out to Fayetteville and out to Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Because the families of some of those men that are coming back wounded and need medical care are living there on the base, and we send packages down to them for their children—you know, books, pads and pencils; we give 'em all kinds of different things for the children. It's just marvelous—but it's the veterans that are doing this. That they—I guess once you're a veteran, you're a veteran. So, you see what's happening. But that's basically my story, and as I say, I'm nowhere a hero. I did serve on the line long enough I got my Combat Infantry Badge. I got my Purple Heart, I got my Bronze Star. But we very seldom talk about it. Now, I do talk about it to my sons, because they're interested in it. But I thought it was wonderful how those boys flew on their own expense to come over. So, they got an interest in it.

MH: Thank you.

End of interview