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Harry Snodgrass oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 21, 2008

Harry Snodgrass (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: All right. Your name is Harry Snodgrass, S-n-o-d-g-r-a-s-s?

Harry Snodgrass: Right.

MH: And you're at....

HS: Right.

MH: Your phone number is....

HS: Right.

MH: And what's your birth date?

HS: October 18. I was born in twenty-two [1922].

MH: In 1922, okay. The unit you got to Buchenwald with was which?

HS: Well, my company was a driving company. It was called the 503rd Quartermaster Car Company, and we were attached to 1st Army, and anywhere anybody in headquarters went, they called us, and we took them and brought them back.

MH: So, you weren't in a combat division, per se?

HS: No.

MH: Tell me, when did you go in the Army?

HS: I went in the Army when I was twenty years old. October 20, 1942.

MH: You were drafted?

HS: No.

MH: You enlisted.

HS: Yes, sir.

MH: What caused you to enlist?

HS: Well, I just—everybody else was leaving, so I thought I'd go, too.

MH: And you were in Tennessee at the time?

HS: Yes, sir. I was raised in Elizabethton, Tennessee, and Johnson City, Tennessee.

MH: Where'd they send you when you joined the army?

HS: They sent me to—at first, they sent me to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and then that was the wrong place. Then they sent me to Camp Forrest, Tennessee. They were taking black volunteers at Fort Oglethorpe, and at Camp Forrest, they were taking white volunteers and black draftees. So, I ended up at Camp Forrest.

MH: Okay, and was trained to do that?

HS: Well, then I went to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky, and that's where I was trained all that winter: marching and shooting and driving and all this stuff. But when we went overseas—like, when we were here on maneuvers, we were attached to 2nd Army headquarters, which was at Cumberland University in Lebanon. And then, when we went overseas, we were attached to 1st Army headquarters in Bristol, England. And anywhere anybody in that headquarters wanted to go, we went. We made a lot of trips from Bristol to London; that's where the main headquarters was, Ike's [Dwight Eisenhower] headquarters and all that stuff.

MH: And you were driving.

HS: Yes, I was driving.

MH: What were you driving, what vehicles?

HS: Oh, overseas, I believe I drove a Packard. I believe it was a Packard. They didn't have enough Army vehicles, I reckon, at that time, so they either took them or people volunteered them or something. Later, we drove staff cars, and then later I drove a Jeep, and when we went into the invasion, I drove a Weasel. That's an (inaudible) that's got tracks on it, and the engine sits right beside of you. Doesn't have a top on it, but that's what I drove into Omaha Beach.

MH: During the invasion?

HS: Yeah, I got there D+1.¹

MH: D+1. How many people does a Weasel carry?

¹ D-Day plus one day, i.e. June 7, 1944.

HS: Oh, it carried about five.

MH: Five folks.

HS: Well, now, I'm talking about—that was crowding them, because really all it had was a backseat, it had the seat that I sat in to drive, then the engine sat beside of me, so it didn't hold many people. But they didn't need it very—they thought they did. It's fine in sand or snow, but on hard surfaces, it makes a lot of noise. So, we didn't keep it long.

MH: Then what happened to you after D-Day?

HS: Well, I drove all over France, and then all over Belgium. People—the 1st Army headquarters would call us, see, and we'd take whoever they wanted to go somewhere: whether it was a sergeant, a lieutenant or a colonel, we'd take 'em and bring 'em back. We went to different places every day. It was really interesting.

MH: What was the highest ranking officer you got to drive around?

HS: Let's see, it seems like I drove a lieutenant general one time. But most of the time, they wasn't near that rank.

MH: Right. Were you in areas that were under fire?

HS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, when I was in London, they were bombing London, and they were dropping these incendiary grenades on the buildings. I was standing in the doorway, and they were falling in the street in front of me. So, they really tried to burn London up. But, now, actually being in combat, I wasn't. I wasn't close enough, you know. Of course, I was close enough to hear artillery fire and this kind of thing, you know.

MH: Where were you during the Battle of the Bulge?

HS: I was in Verviers, Belgium, and it was mud up to our knees there, and we'd moved to Spa, Belgium, to a big house. They didn't call it a "house," it was a wealthy person's chateau or something. That's where we were when the Battle of the Bulge started. They got within ten or twelve miles there, and everybody else at 1st Army headquarters moved; then we moved, back to—it was somewhere in Belgium, but I can't think of the name of

that town now, pretty good-sized town. So, we stayed back there until they got all that cleared out, and then we moved back to Spa, Belgium, and we were located in a hotel there in Spa, Belgium. That's where 1st Army headquarters were, close by. So, wherever 1st Army headquarters was, we were close by.

MH: When did you first hear about concentration camps?

HS: I never had heard about them, till I went into that one at Buchenwald. It just hadn't been talked about. They didn't say, "Men, in a few days, we're gonna be running into some concentration camps." There was nothing like that said at all. And the day that I did go into that one, it was just by accident.

MH: Tell me about that day.

HS: Well, I was driving a Lieutenant Gant from McMinnville, Tennessee. I forget where we had been, but we were heading back to where we had left from. And it was odd. At the end of this road, there were some dead cows laying there in holes or something, and he says, "Whoa, wait a minute. There's something around here," and then he said, "Go down that road right there." So, we went down that road, and it took us right into Buchenwald concentration camp.

MH: Do you remember what date that was?

HS: Well, I can tell you, just about.

MH: Okay.

HS: It was about April 13, 1945.

MH: And Americans were already in there.

HS: No. No, there wasn't any Americans in there. The prisoners was in there, you know, political prisoners and Jews and all this stuff. But the Americans hadn't taken that camp yet, because there was no medical people there or nothing. I seen one American soldier, but all these other people, they were laying there dead or dying, and they had been starved to death. There was no gas chamber there.

MH: Right.

HS: Uh-uh. And I heard that that was one of the smaller camps, so I don't know.

MH: Except—well, you mean it was one of the Buchenwald sub-camps.

HS: Well, this was Buchenwald itself, but there was other camps like Auschwitz and Treblinka that was real, real big.

MH: Buchenwald was pretty big, too.

HS: Well, I've forgotten now. But I know what I seen, you know.

MH: Did you drive into the camp?

HS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MH: You drive in, and you're driving one of the staff cars or something else?

HS: No, I drove a Jeep. I was driving a Jeep then.

MH: Who's with you?

HS: Lieutenant Gant; he was from McMinnville, Tennessee,

MH: McMinnville?

HS: Uh-huh. And what he was, his job, he was a liaison officer for Colonel [John Bruce] Medaris, who was over 1st Army ordnance. He was a colonel, and I drove him a lot.

MH: What unit was Gant with?

HS: What unit was I with?

MH: Was Gant with?

HS: Oh, Gant? He was with 1st Army headquarters; he was with the ordnance department.

MH: Okay. So, you drive into this camp. The gates are open?

HS: Yeah, yeah, drove right in there. And there wasn't no other Americans there.

MH: What time of day was this?

HS: Let's see, this might've been around noon or something like that. There was one American soldier there.

MH: What was he doing?

HS: He was just standing there, looking at this pile of dead people. But there was no American officers, was no American people there or nothing. So, undoubtedly, we were the first ones in there, you know, and there wasn't nothing we could do for them people.

MH: Did the people come up to you?

HS: Yeah.

MH: Were you able to talk to them?

HS: Yeah, most of them couldn't, but I was able to talk to this one man. He was a Lithuanian, and he talked to me, and he said, "You ought to go see this building back here?" and I didn't know what it was, and I said, "Yeah?" and we went back there and

went inside. It was a pretty good-sized building, and it had sawdust on the floors (inaudible). And he said, “This is where they brought the people at night that they wanted to kill.” So, I asked him, I said, “Well, they didn’t use a machine gun, there’s no machine gun fire been in here,” and he said they didn’t use a machine gun. He says, “They had them kneel down and they’d come behind them and shot them in the head.” That’s what this man told me.

MH: How do you react to something like that?

HS: Well, you’re just in shock, you know. You ain’t never seen nothing or heard nothing like this, and I thought, “My God, we wouldn’t even treat a dog like this in our country.” But them people—now, they didn’t have those gas chambers there. The people that I seen were starved to death, that’s all there was to it.

MH: Did they have ovens there?

HS: No, uh-uh. No, they didn’t. There’s one man here in Nashville that’s alive today; my wife handed me this book, and he was in that prison camp when I went in it. His name is Menachem Limor.²

MH: How do you spell his last name?

HS: Last name? Limor, L-i-m-o-r.

MH: Okay. And he’s in Nashville?

HS: Yeah, Nashville, Tennessee. And he was a survivor from Poland, and he was in Buchenwald concentration camp. I’ve got this book is in front of me, and his picture’s in it. I’ve met him. And he said that the day we came in there, he was in there. He was fourteen years old.

MH: How long did you stay inside the camp?

HS: Not long, ’cause I didn’t have any business in there.

² Menachem Limor was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00080.

MH: What was Lieutenant Gant doing?

HS: Well, he was walking around with me, you know, he was just seeing this for the first time, too, and he said, "I guess we better move on." I said, "Yes, sir, let's go." So, you know, he was a lieutenant, but I did whatever he wanted me to do.

MH: What else did you see when you were walking around the camp?

HS: Well, I just seen these people laying there, you know. Some of them were behind this wire fence, and they had clothes on and all, but you could tell they was starving. And the other people I seen were just laying there, some of them dying and some of them dead. But there was no gas chamber there.

MH: Were you able—did you try giving them food, or didn't you have anything?

HS: No, I didn't have anything to give them. But undoubtedly I got there early, because there was no medics there, no one. I'm sure that the medics got there after I left, you know, because those people needed medical treatment bad.

MH: The stuff that I have from the Holocaust Museum and the Army said that Buchenwald was liberated on April 12.

HS: April 12, okay.

MH: And I just wonder if the camp you got to was a sub-camp of Buchenwald, 'cause there were many of them.

HS: No, I guess that date is right. I just said it was the thirteenth, but I'm sure—I don't remember now. I just thought it was about that time, because the war didn't last too long after that, 'cause the war ended, I think, May 8, and of course this was in April.

MH: What were your thoughts as you were walking around that place?

HS: Well, I just—I couldn't think. I had never seen nothing like this. And I told somebody, "Man, we don't treat dogs like this, and these people were human beings." You know, I'll tell you what it'll do: it'll sure change your mind about a lot of things in life.

MH: Such as?

HS: Such as not liking blacks, not liking Italians, not liking Jews. You get in your mind a person is a person. I don't care what else about him, he's a person. And that's what it taught me.

MH: But you came back from the war to the South, and that was a time when—I mean, segregation was still in force. There was a lot of hate going on.

HS: Oh, yeah.

MH: How did you fit in?

HS: Well, I didn't fit in. I had to keep my mouth shut. And I never have believed in that, see. I didn't believe in it when it was going on. I don't think one person's better than another person. I don't care what color he is. None of us has had a choice of what we were coming into this world as.

MH: Did you ever get into an argument because of that?

HS: Oh, yeah, I guess I have.

MH: Tell me about it.

HS: Well, I don't remember, but I just—back then, a lot of people were just so set in their ways, you know. A black was a black and you didn't mix with white people. But I thought it was wrong back then, but you was white back then, but what you didn't like, you just kept your mouth shut.

MH: 'Cause opening your mouth could get you killed.

HS: Yeah, that's right. But I never did think that we treated the black people right.

MH: When did you start speaking out about what you had seen in Buchenwald?

HS: Well, right after I come home. People asked me what I'd seen and I told them, you know. It wasn't only Jews there at that camp, because this man that took me around could speak, and he was a Lithuanian, but they had all kinds of nationalities there, I reckon.

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

HS: Well, let's see. First job I had, I think, I went to work at the post office; it around Christmastime. Then that petered out after Christmas, and then I think I went to work for a laundry. Then I went to work at a rayon plant. I had met a girl down here in Nashville, in Old Hickory, when I was here on maneuvers, so I courted her. She still had a year to go of nursing school at St. Thomas, and you couldn't get married back then if you were in nursing till you completed your three years. I didn't want to marry her right then, anyway. But, anyway, after—we spent—

Ruth Snodgrass: (inaudible)

HS: What, Ruth?

RS: After a few years, we got married.

HS: After a few years we did get married, and I was working for a power company in east Tennessee at that time. And her sister that lived down here, she bought this duplex from DuPont at a real cheap price, and she wrote and told us; we were living in Elizabethton, Tennessee. She [RS] was a nurse working in a hospital there, and I was working at a power company. And she wrote and said that if we decided that we wanted to move to middle Tennessee, she would sell us that duplex for just what she paid for it, and it was like between \$5,000, \$6,000. So, I thought to myself that there's more opportunities in middle Tennessee than there are here in east Tennessee, so I agreed to move down here. So, the first job I had, I went to work for DuPont. They had two plants down here in Old Hickory, a rayon plant and a cellophane plant, and my wife went to work in nursing for DuPont, and that's where we spent more of our time. Then I got a job with—what was I

working at, Ruth? Where'd I spent twenty-six years at? Where did I spend twenty-six years working?

RS: Ford.

HS: Ford Glass Plant in Nashville. I went to work out there in fifty-seven [1957], and I was one of the production workers. Then I got into inspection, and that paid a little more on the hour, and I stayed in inspection till I retired. I had twenty-six years' service, and I was sixty years old. I went to work when I was thirty-four years old out there. I live here ... got a few acres and happy as a lark. Done got old, (laughs) but don't owe nobody nothing.

MH: You got grandkids?

HS: Huh?

MH: You have kids?

HS: Yeah.

MH: And grandkids?

HS: Have three boys, grandchildren.

MH: Three boys. How many children did you have?

HS: Two boys.

MS: Two boys, okay.

HS: Didn't have any girls.

MH: Did you ever run into Lieutenant Gant after the war?

HS: Yeah. I went to see him up there, and he would stop and see me when he comes to Nashville.

MH: What's his first name, do you know?

HS: Paul Gant.

MH: Do you know if he's still alive?

HS: Huh?

MH: Is he still alive?

HS: No, he's dead.

MH: Oh, he died, okay.

HS: He was in gas distribution up there, owned a gas depot or distributor, something like that. Gant Oil Company.

MH: Okay. Anything else you can think of about how that experience might have affected your life?

HS: Well, I can't right offhand, but I think it did, 'cause the things I've seen—and I wasn't in combat, not like a lot of people, but I was close to it and stuff like that, you know. I think you grow up, and you find out that there's another world out there besides the one you live in. And some of it is not a nice world, but you have to go along. Well, of course, in the army, you do what they told you to do, period, you know. And I never did have any trouble doing my duty in the army and obeying the sergeants and officers and whatnot. I didn't have any trouble like that.

MH: Do you have a photo of yourself from World War II?

HS: Yeah. Yeah, I got a photo of me.

MH: I wonder if it's possible, if I sent you an envelope, could you send me that picture and a current picture of yourself and I'll scan them into the computer and send them right back to you.

HS: Okay.

MH: Okay, so I'll mail you an envelope for that.

HS: All right.

MH: Okay. And if you think of anything else, please don't hesitate to call me.

HS: I was here on maneuvers, now, Tennessee maneuvers; that was in forty-three [1943], and that's when I met my future wife. (laughs) We're still living together.

MH: Is she around? Can I talk to her for one second?

HS: Yeah, just a minute. Ruth?

RS: Hello.

MH: Hi, your first name is Ruth?

RS: Yes.

MH: I'd like to ask you a couple questions. When did your husband tell you about having seen what he saw in the concentration camps?

RS: Oh, I'll be. This is—we were married thirty years or longer before this ever become an active part of our lives. We didn't have reunions like a lot of the—he didn't, rather, with the company, you know. And so, Harry didn't discuss it.

MH: Do you remember the first time he told you about seeing what he saw at Buchenwald?

RS: Oh. Wait, just a minute; let me ask him about the date he went overseas. Hold on just a minute. (talking to Harry, voices are inaudible) It was after he went overseas for the fortieth anniversary of D-Day.

MH: So, it took that long for him to mention it to you.

RS: Yeah.

MH: What did you think when he told you about it?

RS: Well, I was horrified. And then he also had a lot of pictures. I don't know if he mentioned that.

MH: No, he didn't.

RS: Doctor Gant—(laughs) Doctor Gant. Mr. Gant took—Harry didn't know that he had a camera with him that day, and he took a lot of pictures of bodies and the living conditions and things that they were under, you know. Then we saw those. But it could've been before then, come to think of it, because Harry and I were with Mr. Gant before eighty-three [1983].

MH: Do you still have those pictures that Mr. Gant took?

RS: Oh, yes. They're in Nashville at the archives and the state capitol.

MH: They're in the—so, you don't have copies.

RS: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MH: I was—I told your husband I was going to send him an envelope, because I want to borrow a picture of him from World War II and also a current picture. And then, if you send it to me, I'll scan it into the computer and return them back. But if you could also send a couple of Gant's pictures, that would be good.

RS: Well, now, we won't have any pictures from Mr. Gant.

MH: You don't have any copies.

RS: Oh, you mean the ones he made—

MH: Yes.

RS: —of the people?

MH: Yes.

RS: The bodies? Oh, yeah, we've got copies of those.

MH: Okay. Does Mr. Gant have a widow that's still alive?

RS: Of course, he was married, but I don't know. His sons are still active up there, live in McMinnville, but I don't believe Mrs. Gant would be living. But I don't know that.

MH: But his sons are still living?

RS: In McMinnville.

MH: Okay.

RS: I think they still run that oil company.

MH: Okay.

RS: You could contact them.

MH: Okay, all right. Yeah, I actually see on the computer there's a Paul H. Gant who lives in McMinnville.

RS: That's it.

MH: That's him, okay. All right. Well, I thank you very much for your time, and thank you for your husband's time.

RS: All right.

MH: Okay, take care.

RS: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview