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Manfred Steinfeld oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, December 23, 2008

Manfred Steinfeld (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. This interview begins in mid-sentence.]

Manfred Steinfeld: —the Russians. We left about eight o'clock in the morning. We knew we were gonna be contacting the Russians, because we had accepted the day before the surrender of the 21st German Army Group [Army Group Vistula], General [James M.] Gavin from the 82nd Airborne. In fact, I translated—assisted in the translation of the (inaudible) surrender document when we accepted all the troops that would be passing under the 82nd Airborne Division lines. The next morning, since I spoke German and spoke a few words of Russian—I went to ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] studying Russian in 1943. So, I was on the patrol that made the official contact with the Russians that morning about ten-thirty, eleven o'clock, and got back about three o'clock that afternoon. It was actually about no more than six miles or seven miles from where the Russian headquarters were to be. I heard that we liberated some sort of camp, not a concentration camp.

Wöbbelin was really basically in existence for only six weeks. It was built as a labor camp. During the six-week period, since it didn't have any utilities and any of the collateral—like, you need showers and so on, and toilets. Everything was under construction. It was built at the last minute. They didn't decide to build it until the first week in March, so there was—I mean, the conditions could not have been—I mean, they were terrible. When we got there, of course, none of the barracks had windows: none of them had been completed. We found most of the inmates—some were okay, but most of them were very close to dying. And among the bodies that were found piled up and those that we evacuated, the next—we found a total of 200 bodies, which were then buried in the town square in Ludwigslust.

Michael Hirsh: There were—something I've read said there were another 800 bodies that were buried in mass graves in the woods.

MS: Yes.

MH: Who buried those bodies?

MS: I don't know.

MH: Okay. But that was before the Americans got there.

MS: Right.

MH: How did this burial in the town square of Ludwigslust come about?

MS: General Gavin ordered that the bodies that we discovered, according to a directive from General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower: that any death or concentration camp victims that are found or discovered are to be given a decent burial. And General Gavin decided, since the headquarters was in the Castle Ludwigslust, to take the park in front of the castle as a burial ground. And the town was ordered to dig the 200 graves. And the entire town—after the bodies were put in front of each grave, covered in a white sheet, the entire town was ordered to march by and pay respect to the dead.

MH: How did it happen that there were crosses at the head of each grave?

MS: On the head of each grave, there was a cross, and on every fourth cross, they painted a Mogen Dovid, because the estimate that we made was that there were about 25 percent Jews in there. The bulk were political prisoners from Belgium, from Holland, from all over. So, just arbitrarily, someone from the military government office came to the conclusion that probably 25 percent of the inmates were Jewish.

MH: I've just never seen the Mogen Dovid painted on a cross before.

MS: Well, but that's—if you look at the video I'm going to send you, you can probably make it out.

MH: I've seen it on one still photo. I also saw that there was a burial of additional bodies —

MS: Yes, there was a burial of additional bodies very close to the camp where today is a monument. There was also—during the days of Napoleon, there was a famous battle in that town, and they buried additional bodies in that particular location.

MH: Tell me about the service in the town square.

MS: Well, it was—obviously, I spoke German, and I was in charge of coordinating some of the activities with the local mayor's office. It was a very solemn ceremony. And, of course, the Germans felt what we were making them do, to walk by the deceased, the bodies, was an insult to the Germanic character, so to speak. The town by itself, of course—everybody claimed, “We didn't know.” I mean, that was the standard excuse, “We didn't know.” They knew something was going on, but they didn't want to know. But I will—what I'm going to send you, and a very good person to interview.

When we had the rededication—what happened, I went back to the town in the year 2000, and I looked for the cemetery where we buried the 200 bodies. No sign of the cemetery. Everything was gone. I said, “That's not possible!” So, I got a hold of somebody through the Wöbbelin Museum, and he tells me that all the wooden crosses that we had put on during the winter of 1948, which was—there was no coal, there was no fuel. They took all the crosses and they burned them. See, this became Russian territory. So, the only monument they have there was the stone that says, “On this site, in the ground, are buried 200” —I don't know the exact terminology, but 200—

MH: “Victims,” probably.

MS: “—victims of Nazism and National Socialism,” and so on. They did not make no reference to Jews and so on, none whatsoever.

MH: To go back to the ceremony, the burial ceremony, did the Germans—they were objecting verbally, or they were just—?

MS: No, no, no. I mean, since I spoke German and I listened to some of the conversations, I could gather that they resented the fact we made them walk by. No one spoke verbally out loud that this is an insult to the—whatever you want to call it.

MH: Did somebody do a simultaneous translation of Chaplain [George B.] Wood's speech?

MS: I don't remember, but I think I have it—I don't think so. I don't think so.

MH: 'Cause he pretty much threw it in their face.

MS: Yeah.

MH: And then—I've seen the footage. Then the local Germans were made to fill the graves.

MS: Yes.

MH: What else do you remember hearing them talk about?

MS: Well, the conversation I heard that this is—I mean, that we are—the Germanic character is being violated by them having to perform this particular service, because they had nothing to do with it. But Chaplain Wood said, "By a government locally elected by you." He was very precise in his terminology.

MH: At the time this was going on, did you know where your—what had happened with your mother and sister?

MS: No. No, I did not. I didn't find out till—this was the first week in May. Probably we discovered the camp May 2, and I think the burial probably took place May 9 or thereabouts.

MH: I think it was May 7.

MS: Oh, May 7. Then I got permission—no, then I was assigned to a military government office as a member of the CIC [Counter Intelligence Corps] unit of a town called Boizenburg, which was about twenty-five miles away. I really was in charge of the military government office. I walked down the street one day, and a woman came up to me and she said, “The man walking on the other side of the street is a war criminal.” She had on the concentration camp striped dress and so on. So, we crossed the street and arrested him, and it turned out his name was Ludwig Ramdohr.

MH: How do you spell the last name?

MS: R-a-m-d-o-h-r. And I’m going to tell you some interesting facts about that in a moment. We arrested him, and he admitted his identity. And I’ve got—I interrogated him, and he signed—whatever he told us, we made him sign, and then we turned him over to the British military tribunal in Hamburg. We were attached to the 2nd British Army, the only American unit that was that far north. And I thought that was the end of him, but he keeps coming back in my life.

The woman who came up to me was a survivor of the concentration camp at Ravensbrück, and her name was Margarete Buber-Neumann. She was the daughter-in-law of Martin Buber, and she was married to Heinz Neumann before Hitler came to power, who was the leader of the Communist Party of Germany. When Hitler came to power, they fled to Switzerland, through a lot of pressure by the Germans, who wanted them repatriated to Germany, which didn’t happen. Subsequently, the Swiss gave them safe passage and they were both repatriated to the Soviet Union, who then, in turn, asked him, Heinz Neumann, to fight with the loyalists in Spain, which he did in probably thirty-four [1934], thirty-five [1935]. The war in Spain, the civil war was in 1934 and thirty-five [1935].

When they lost and he came back to the Soviet Union, he was promptly put on trial and executed for being a traitor to the cause, and his wife was sentenced to ten years at a Siberian labor camp. When [Vyacheslav] Molotov signed the non-aggression pact with Germany, she was repatriated to Germany, and she was put in Ravensbrück concentration camp for women, and she was in there from 1939 to 1944. She’s written many books after liberation and so on. I notified—after she identified herself, she wanted me to notify her two daughters, who lived with Professor Martin Buber in Jerusalem. I notified my younger brother, who was living in Palestine at the time, to notify him that she survived, which he did.

That’s pretty much the end of it, until I endowed a chair in Judaic studies at University of Tennessee, and the professor who handles that department, or the chair-holder, wrote a book on Martin Buber. She met the daughter living in Israel today, interviewed her, and

she mentioned me and my experiences. And that professor said—she was also a professor; I forgot her last name now—that “We’ve been trying to locate the young man for the last fifty years who notified us. We got a postcard that our mother was still alive.” And I finally met her in Toronto, Canada, when her husband was teaching in the summer at York University. I went up to meet her, and it was a very tearful reunion, so to speak. And that was the end of Part I.

Another thing that happened is with all the discussion about water-boarding, is water-boarding acceptable punishment? The other day—well, six months ago, when all the discussion took place because of what they’re doing in Guantanamo—I mean, the type of punishment that we used in Guantanamo, which included water-boarding. I go to Google, I put this war criminal’s name in Google, and lo and behold, he’s the one who invented water-boarding. In this day and age, fifty-some years later, Ludwig Ramdohr made Google because of the water-boarding, for which he was sentenced to death. And he was hung by the British.

MH: Hmm. What was the town that you were in?

MS: The town that—?

MH You mentioned the name of the town that you were working in.

MS: As military governor. Boizenburg an der Elbe.

MH: Boizenburg?

MS: B-o-i-z-e-n-b-u-r-g an der Elbe, which is on the Elbe River.

MH: This may be a strange question or maybe not, but how do you feel about Germans?

MS: How do I feel about Germans? For many years, I didn’t want anything to do with them. I would go to Europe on business; being in the furniture business, I went to the international furniture show in Cologne. That was in—the first time I was back was probably in the late fifties [1950s] or early sixties [1960s]. I drove through the town I was born in. I didn’t even stop. I didn’t want anything to do with them. But then subsequently, I did stop. And I, of course, went back as an American soldier in 1945—I mean, through the town. I was born in a small town where there was very little anti-

Semitism. I left at age fourteen. I was never harassed, I was never beaten, and I had a number of German friends with whom I correspond even today.

And how I feel about it? In the year 2000, a young man from that town contacted me and said, “I married such-and-such’s daughter, and I live in Josbach,” the name of the town. “I’ve heard about your family and I’ve heard about the other Jews, and I’ve been working for a long time that the town council ought to put up a memorial to the three Jewish families who were killed from this town, who lived here for over 200 years.” Would I come to the dedication, since it’s been approved, and would I speak? That was the year 2000. So, we went there, and I took eleven people with me. I did speak in that town, in German. It was supposed to be outside, but it rained. It was inside a church, and that church was right across the street from the house I was born in, where we lived. So, I received a very cordial welcome. Was I totally at ease or totally comfortable? Probably not.

However, I did do the following: After they did the memorial and had the unveiling, they had the whole town—they had 150 people for dinner, which the town paid for. I asked them, “Now that you have this done, what can I do for the town?” I felt since of their own initiative they put up a memorial to—because a young member of the community felt that the community owed it to the victims. I mean, they had a decent memorial. So, I asked what I could do for them. They said, “We need a youth center. We don’t have a youth center in the town.” So, after a long correspondence, I agreed to pay a certain amount for the youth center, provided they name it after my younger brother, who left after I did and who was killed in Palestine.

In 2007, we had the most significant memorial service I’ve ever participated in, in the town. And Fern didn’t want to go, my wife. So, after the service—she was born in Chicago, and she was not particularly pleased to go to Germany under any circumstances. She said, “You did a good thing.” They put up a beautiful plaque, which tells the complete history of his short life in Germany and then Palestine and how he was killed. The upper part is in English; the lower part is in German. They built a youth center, which I hope will stay, like every building in this town is 200 years or 300 years old. I think future generations in this town, long after I’m gone, have the question—I mean, this—in other words, there were Jews living in this town.

Now, another thing that’s happened, of course, as you know, in the history of Jews in Germany today: When the Russian Jews started to immigrate to Germany, the German government resettled them not in the big towns, but in every town of any decent size that had a Jewish community before. They resettled the Russian Jews in those towns. Today, you probably have 200 towns in Germany again with a Jewish population. I was born sixteen miles—no, twenty-four kilometers, sixteen miles—from Marburg. Do you know where Marburg is?

MH: No, but you were about seventy miles north of Frankfurt.

MS: Yeah. So here's the town of Marburg, a beautiful university town, an ancient city, probably 1,000 years old. Everything is 800 or 900 years old. It has a Jewish community. And you go to Giessen, it has a Jewish community. So, all these towns of a population of 50,000 or more now again have Jews living in them: trying to make amends in some reasonable fashion.

MH: Do you find Germans—and this comes out of a personal experience I had; I'll tell you in a minute. But do you find Germans making excuses for people who did nothing, who watched it happen?

MS: Again, I don't have much contact with—I did have a lot of contact at one time through business, and very seldom did we get involved in that. I mean, everyone tells you, "We knew nothing about it."

MH: "We knew nothing. *Nicht Nazi.*"

MS: Right. And basically, in the small towns, most of the population was agriculture and peasants. They were certainly not educated. I mean, they only had public school up to the eighth grade: that's the only thing that was required. When you go today—we went to the Berlin Museum, which told me 95 percent of the attendees, and it is the most attended museum in Germany today, are all Germans, and all young Germans, who want to make a—maybe clean their conscience. I don't know. It's just—are they making excuses? I think most of those who were involved in the brutality, they're all gone. There're still a few alive.

But I can only tell you this: there's a woman in the town where I was born whose father joined the Nazi Party in 1927 or twenty-eight [1928]. When Hitler came to power, he was made the mayor. But he would play cards with the Jewish men at that town once a week. I remember distinctly going to his office when my grandmother told me, "I want you to go to call the mayor." There were two men in SS uniforms from a town a couple towns away, who came to arrest my grandmother. Why? Because we had a mortgage on the home and some of the land which they owned, which I don't—I don't know. They must've bought things from us.

So, I got hold of the mayor, and the mayor looked at their credentials and said, “You have no jurisdiction in this town. Mrs. Steinfeld, she is a citizen of this town, and your attempt to arrest her is totally unfounded,” and he threw them out and they left. Okay? So, while he was a member of the SR—I mean, going back to the twenties [1920s]—he certainly included in his lifetime a certain friendship with the Jews of the town. But I don’t have any contact or any serious relationships—I mean business-wise or any other way—with anybody from Germany.

MH: In writing the book that I’m working on, I just spent a week and a half dealing with the massacre at Gardelegen, where they herded 1,100 people into a big barn and set it on fire. There were only a small group of SS people involved, and they had no trouble recruiting *Volkssturm* and the Hitler Youth and other people from the town to help.

MS: Where was that?

MH: Gardelegen. It’s about twenty miles from the Elbe River. It’s about twenty miles from Salzwedel.

MS: I don’t know where either of those towns are located.

MH: Okay. In any event, they had no trouble recruiting what have come to be called the “good Germans” to help them.

MS: When did that take place?

MH: It took place April 15. April 15, 1945. The 102nd Division was twenty-four hours away. They knew it was coming. The excuse they gave for doing this was that in another town, concentration camp inmates who were on a death march had broken free and had looted and raped people. So, they were able to recruit people from this town to put these people in this barn, set it on fire, and anybody who tried to get out—they had surrounded it with people with guns, and they shot them. Then they went into the barn and looked for survivors, and shot them, too.

What I wasn’t able to get out of my system is that these were the “good Germans” who were helping to do this. They didn’t have to. They outnumbered the SS people. They had weapons. They could’ve just said, “We know the American army will be here in a day. Leave.” And they didn’t. The woman here in Punta Gorda who cuts my hair is German. Her father was in the Hitler Youth, and when I’ve talked to her about it, she

says, “Well, they didn’t really have a choice, because if they refused to let him join the Hitler Youth, then the family would’ve suffered.” And it’s—

MS: Well, they wouldn’t have suffered; they would’ve been ostracized.

MH: Okay. But when I put that together with the research on this particular massacre, to me, it’s almost worse than the camps, because these were people who didn’t have to do this. They could’ve just said no. These were supposedly just the ordinary Germans, which is why I asked the question how you felt about the Germans.

MS: I think I answered.

MH: Yes.

MS: I mean, those that I’m in contact with, that young man who was responsible for the memorial. I have e-mails from once a week; he keeps me posted. And I think today, and also about twenty years ago—oh, probably twenty years ago, I got a call from a young man I went to school with in Germany, public school, before I left in 1938. He said, “I have a son who’d like to come to the United States. Can you put him to work?” I said, “Sure, have him come here.” He worked for us for year in Morristown, Tennessee, in one of our factories. And I’m in touch with the family. I mean, pretty much, the people were decent. They joined because it was fashionable to join. Did any of them in their army career become murderers and kill people, or kill Poles or Russians or Jews? Quite possible.

MH: Yeah. Or take over the Jewish apartments and homes and property.

MS: Well, I mean, that was more—that was in a very organized fashion that was done. When they started deporting the Jews, the Jews from the province of Hesse, where I was born between Frankfurt and Kassel, they were deported in November of forty-one [1941] to Riga, Latvia. They took a detailed inventory on all their personal belongings, all their furniture, and most of it was confiscated and sold. Whatever proceeds they received was put in escrow, and I got it in 1947 or 1948. So, they were very organized in keeping detailed records of all that. For instance, when Hitler passed the law that the middle name of any Jew is—let’s see—

MH: Israel or Sarah.

MS: Men were Israel, and women were Sarah. They went back to all the birth records and added the middle names to all of them. Can you believe that? Dead or alive. And then in 1947, when that was rescinded, they went back to make the changes again. But that's the German mentality.

MH: Yeah. I've only been—I literally passed through Germany. I was embedded with the Air Force in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and flying back from Afghanistan, I went through Frankfurt. I spent a day and a half there.

MS: Did you go to the cemetery in Frankfurt?

MH: No.

MS: Well, that by itself is—my grandmother's buried in the cemetery in Frankfurt. And the amazing part of it is that all the Jewish cemeteries in most of Germany, with the exception that any bronze or metal plates were removed for war purposes, to be melted down, the cemeteries were left intact. No respect for the living, but limited respected for the dead. And this cemetery is in the middle of Frankfurt.

MH: Yeah. I didn't think about it. I was just anxious to get home at that point. Could I —

MS: What did you do in Chicago?

MH: I worked for WTTW Channel 11. I did a lot of documentaries and investigative reporting. Actually, I was also on the radio, on WLS Radio on Sunday nights with a public affairs program. In 1983, we moved to Los Angeles, and I spent nineteen years there in television. I hit an age where you—somebody my age couldn't go in and sell programs to twenty-six year old network executives. And I began writing books. We moved to Punta Gorda seven years ago.

MS: I've been to Punta Gorda. I furnished some nursing homes there many years ago. I was in the furniture manufacturing business.

MH: Right, I know. As I said, I've read about you online. This particular book has been an interesting project. It puts my mind in the Holocaust for about a year and a half or two years.

MS: Well, when you think that we, in our own lifetime, what we've experienced and what we're experiencing today—you know, Mr. [Bernie] Madoff is the financial holocaust for the Jewish community.

MH: Yeah.

MS: What he has brought about is just unbelievable. And all the charitable institutions and all the dollars that are no longer available, it's actually a holocaust.

MH: The one thing I haven't seen in the articles about him is how much money did he actually put in his pocket, and what did he do with it?

MS: I don't think he put a lot of money in his pocket. I think what he did, I think he lived fairly well, but—

(to someone else) I'm talking to Mr. Hirsh.

MH: Michael.

MS: I don't think he put any money in his pocket. I mean, the lifestyle that he had was fairly high: belonged to several country clubs, a couple of airplanes, a couple boats. I think it started innocently enough, and then, all of a sudden, it worked. And then he started getting more money in than he had to pay out. I know a lot of people who invested with him from our country club here. In fact, I was asked by one of our neighbors, who moved away since—they live on the ocean—"Why didn't you put some money with Madoff? He's the best." My answer was, "I used William Blair in Chicago to manage money, and they lost money for me. I used Northern Trust, and they lost money. I used Continental Bank, and they lost money. If I'm gonna lose money, let me lose it myself." I don't have to blame anybody else.

MH: Right. Do you have a photo from World War II days, in the army uniform?

MS: Well, you're going to get this video. It's on the cover.

MH: It's on the cover? Okay.

MS: Let me get your address—

MH: What's your email address?

MS: ...

MH: Okay. Why don't I just email my address to you?

MS: Okay.

MH: Would that work easier?

MS: That's okay.

MH: Okay. And at some point when—I'm not sure when I'm gonna get over to the east coast [of Florida], but I'd like to meet you in person.

MS: Any time. How old are you?

MH: Sixty-five.

MS: Oh, I'm twenty years older.

MH: Yes. The people I've interviewed for this book range from eighty-three to ninety-six.

MS: Have you seen the documentary *About Face*?

MH: No.

MS: Produced by Chicago. It's all basically German Jewish immigrants serving in the American or British military.

MH: I didn't ask you, speaking of that, how did you end up in the Army? Did you enlist?

MS: No. In 1943, I was going to the University of Illinois—

MH: In Champaign?

MS: Yeah. Since you're a resident of the United States—you didn't have to be a citizen to be drafted in the Army. The Selective Service Act covered the residents of the United States. So, I was drafted, and I went in the Army on March 3, 1945. I was discharged in October forty-five [1945], and I was called back during the Korean War for two years.

MH: How did you happen to go Airborne?

MS: Well, I was stationed in military intelligence headquarters in London in July of 1945, and I had gone to military intelligence school.

MH: Forty-five [1945] or forty-four [1944]?

MS: Forty-four [1944]. Forty-four [1944]. And I was an expert on the German army. I was an order of battle specialist. And they said, "We need—you have the requirements we need for the airborne units," because until Normandy, there were two American airborne divisions, 82nd and 101st, and then subsequently there were two additional airborne divisions, the 13th and the 17th. Those units had to be staffed. I volunteered and went to jump school in England, and I joined the 82nd Airborne Division.

MH: How many jumps did you make?

MS: I made a total of—well, I didn't make any combat jumps. I was in Normandy, but I didn't jump in Normandy. I got to Normandy probably D+30, because I came to Europe

right after Normandy.¹ I landed in a glider in Holland; we crash landed. Being in the glider was nowhere as safe as jumping.

MH: (laughs) You have less control.

MS: You have less control, and there were a lot more casualties, because the gliders would crash. Normally in a glider you would have a Jeep and four or five people, and everything would crash at that particular impact. So, the casualty rate, especially in Normandy with the gliders, was much higher than those who jumped.

MH: In the gliders, when you're being towed in, how far away from the landing zone do they actually cut you free?

MS: How far? Since I was not a glider pilot, I can only tell you that normally there are two gliders attached to every C-47, one to the left and one to the—I mean, how far?

MH: Yeah. I mean, how many miles—?

MS: Well, three to five miles, I would say. You can see the landing zone.

MH: How high up are you?

MS: At that particular point? Probably 2,000 feet, 1,500 feet, 2,500 feet. All I know is when you jump, you're at a height of about 1,000 to 1,200 feet, because the entire descent should be as brief as possible so you don't become a target. So, the jumps are normally made at 1,200 feet or even less, down to 800 feet, so you get to the ground as quickly as possible. And the glider's the same way. I have to assume the gliders were 2,000 feet, thereabout.

MH: It was D+30 when you landed in the glider in Holland?

MS: No, no. I mean, Holland took place September 17, 1944.

MH: Forty-four [1944], okay.

¹ D-Day, June 6, 1944, plus thirty days, i.e. July 6, 1944.

MS: And Normandy was June 6. When I joined the 82nd Airborne, they were still in Normandy when I joined them, and then from Normandy, we went to Leicester, England, where we were through most of July and August until we jumped in Holland on September 17.

MH: Of forty-four [1944]. Okay. So, you went into Normandy, then came back out to England, and then went back in.

MS: I don't remember the exact date that I was attached to the unit, but I would say it was probably—I would have to check my Army records. Probably August, the first part of August, because we came to Leicester, England, in the middle of August. The 82nd Airborne was in Normandy for about forty to sixty days; different units were sent back sooner. Because the total casualty they suffered, out of 11,000 men who came in, was 50 percent casualties.

MH: What was your rank when you got to Wöbbelin?

MS: I was a staff sergeant.

MH: Staff sergeant. Okay. Thank you very, very much for taking the time to talk with me. I really look forward to seeing the DVD.

MS: Send me your address.

MH: You'll have it in about two minutes.

MS: Okay.

MH: Okay. And, as I said, when I get over to the east coast, I'd like to come and meet you. I'd actually like to take a current picture of you to use in the book.

MS: Okay. Well, anytime.

MH: How long are you going to be down here?

MS: We'll be here till about April 15.

MH: Okay. All right. Thank you again very much.

MS: Okay. Bye-bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

Pause in recording

MH: That was Manfred Steinfeld, S-t-e-i-n-f-e-l-d.

End of interview