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Herbert Cohen oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 28, 2008

Herbert Cohen (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: Okay. You hear me okay?

Herbert Cohen: Yeah, I hear you loud and clear.

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

HC: Herbert, H-e-r-b-e-r-t, Cohen, C-o-h-e-n.

MH: Okay, and the last easy question is your date of birth.

HC: 10-25-24 [October 25, 1924].

MH: Okay. Um, where did you grow up? Where were you before the war?

HC: Brooklyn. Brooklyn, New York.

MH: And—

HC: All right, here's something that could be of interest. In forty-two [1942], forty-two [1942], when I turned eighteen, stupid kid that I was, I didn't wait to get drafted. They had what was called voluntary enlistment, and I volunteered. And of course, they took me.

MH: Of course. Where did they send you?

HC: All right, now, I started out—and this is something else. I started out in the airborne, 11th Airborne Division in Camp McCall, North Carolina. And I wasn't a paratrooper. I flew the gliders, the CG-4As, plastic supposed aircraft, but it got the job done.

MH: They trained you on the gliders for how long?

HC: Well, let's see. In 1943, there was on the bulletin boards, anyone who wanted to take the test for the Air Corps aviation cadets could do so, which I did, and which I passed. So, after my—incidentally, what I was in my infantry platoon, I was a 60mm mortar, and I also handled the .30 machine gun.

MH: Okay.

HC: And then I took the test for the Air Corps and I passed the darn thing, which I think saved my life. I then went down to Florida, prior to basic training, and ended up living in a hotel. But then, finally, they shipped me to—oh, my, where was that in?—Alabama. All right, I was a cadet. I flunked out; and then, about that time, it was D-Day. Evidently, we suffered—well, not evidently; we did suffer a tremendous amount of casualties. And the individuals that were from the ground forces, the—what was it, STAP, what they had at that time?

MK: Yeah, ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program].

HC: ASTP. All those guys and myself were sent back to the ground forces. And, of course, the army, in their wisdom, instead of sending me to an infantry outfit, sent me in a tank—to a tank outfit, the 20th Armored Division in Camp Campbell, Kentucky.

MH: Okay.

HC: All right. And instead of going on a tank—I don't know if you've ever seen a Sherman tank with the top cut off and a 105 [mm] howitzer mounted. It was artillery on the run. And I was a cannoneer, and I finished another basic training, so this was my third basic training.

MH: Okay.

HC: And let's see, what happened then? All right, then we—as far as I was concerned, let's see, I stayed with the 20th Armored, and then we shipped overseas from—I guess it was [Camp] Myles Standish, Massachusetts; it was Boston. And we ended up in France.

MH: Were you going to—

HC: No, we didn't—we didn't hit the D-Day, as far as combat.

MH: Right.

HC: But we did end up in Le Havre, and stationed in one of those small French villages.

MH: When did you go over?

HC: In—oh, jeez, either December or January of forty—it must have been forty-five [1945], the early part of forty-five [1945]. And at that time—you know, I should have gone over my book again, because now my recollections are hazy.

MH: Okay. Did you go over before or after the Battle of the Bulge?

HC: This was during the Battle of the Bulge.

MH: Okay, then it was—

HC: December—

MH: December of forty-four [1944].

HC: Of forty-four [1944]. And then we became part of, I guess, [George S.] Patton's 3rd Army. We were supporting, I think, not only Patton's 3rd Army but [Courtney] Hodges. Now, Hodges was what, 5th or 6th, 5th Army? But we were there and then we went into combat. Combat, I hate that expression. You know, when you get shelled and when you get machine gunned for ten minutes and then you're bored to death for a day or so, whatever.

MH: Right.

HC: Yeah, and then we went through Holland, Belgium. We crossed the—into Germany, I guess at Aachen. And from Aachen, we then went into Bavaria, and that's where we did most of our fighting, or call it what you will.

MH: What were—what was your specific job at that point? Were you still on the same—

HC: At that point, I was a cannoneer.

MH: Still the same kind of vehicle?

HC: On the M7 tank. That's the—yeah, that's the one with the 105.

MH: Okay.

HC: And you know, of course, it was open. There was nothing to cover us. And we had fire mission after fire mission and did what we had to do, and captured a hell of a lot of Germans.

MH: How does—tell me about that. How does that happen?

HC: Well, as we were going down into Bavaria, the Germans were just about out, and they were giving up. But no, here's something which is the most awful thing. Driven

before us—the concentration camp victims were driven from concentration camp to concentration camp. And of course, so many of them would die en route, and I remember we would capture a lot of Germans, Austrians, or whatever, and they would dig their graves and we had to bury them. Another—

MH: Were you seeing the concentration camp victims?

HC: What's that?

MH: Were you seeing large numbers of the concentration camp victims?

HC: Well, this was—they were force marching them to camp to camp. And they must have been force marching them to Dachau, or wherever. Let's see—

MH: Do you remember the first time you saw the concentration camp people?

HC: Oh, my God!

MH: I know, I'm—

HC: It must have been—let's see, we were there in—we liberated Dachau and Hadamar and Mühldorf, another adjacent concentration camp to Dachau.

MH: Right.

HC: It must have been the end of April or beginning of May.

MH: Right, Hadamar would have been the beginning of April, and Mühldorf was toward the end of April.

HC: Okay, okay.

MH: Well, actually Mühldorf was around May 3 or 4.

HC: Okay, because I remember when I went into—when we went into Dachau, the ovens were still warm. And, you know—

MH: Okay, but let's—let me take you back, if I can, in time.

HC: Okay, sure.

MH: When you're first coming into Bavaria, and you said Germans are surrendering to you, are these the same Germans who have been force marching the concentration camp people?

HC: No, no, no. The Germans that we—at that time—were the combat Germans. Of course the ones force marching the concentration people, concentration camp people, were either Hitler-Jugend or old individuals in their forties or fifties who were forced into the German army. At that time, they were taking anybody.

MH: Right. So—

HC: You know, here's a point which—during the Bulge, during the Bulge, the Germans captured quite a few—in fact, you've heard of the 106th Infantry?

MH: Right.

HC: Okay. Now, they were really beaten up badly. You know, they were a young division, they were in a line in that—I guess it was starting in December—and the Germans, when they caught a batch of them plus others, it was a massacre. I mean, you remember this.

MH: Yes.

HC: Now, what was it—because what happened was this: We were—when we captured SS, and we captured quite a few SS, how we identified them they had a tattoo in their armpits, under their—I forget which it was, the left or the right. And, you know, it was a very bad situation if we caught—and we were told how to identify the troops, the German

SS who were involved in this massacre, and they were put on the side for special handling, which I'm not going to go into. And then, of course, we hit Dachau and Hadamar and we ended up in Austria, in Salzburg.

MH: Right. How did you happen upon Hadamar?

HC: Well, this was en route going down through Bavaria. In fact, I should have my division book with me now, but I don't. Let me get the—do you have a minute?

MH: Sure, absolutely.

HC: Let me get the—your stay in Vietnam, you were in the—

MH: I was in the 25th.

HC: 25th Infantry?

MH: Right.

HC: Okay. Are you with me?

MH: Yes.

HC: Okay. Okay, here's a separate section, Dachau, and—okay, "The 20th Armored Division led the way to its capture by infantry troops. 20th Armored was there and saw the nauseating sights." All right, look, I'm gonna get—not good. It doesn't go away. It doesn't go away.

MH: Right.

HC: But I'm trying to get that part.

MH: What was your rank at that time?

HC: Uh, PFC [private first class]. PFC or private. I ended up a corporal, but that's another story about the possibility of going to Japan. You know, Harry Truman—we were going to be the lead armored division, but of course they dropped the bomb.

MH: Right.

HC: Okay, let's see. Let's see where—you know, you're taking interest in Hadamar. May I ask why?

MH: It's one of the more unusual places that American troops liberated. I've interviewed one man who was already there, and I'd like to find others who were there. I mean, the book encompasses camps that many people have probably never even heard of. People have always heard of the big ones. Dachau had about 200 sub-camps that most people don't know about, including Mühldorf.

HC: We were—we got hit bad outside of Munich, München. Yeah, we lost quite a few, a lot of our tanks. I don't know if you've ever heard the expression: the Germans called our tanks—they had a special name that once it hit it, it went up. Well, of course, when you go against the Panzers and you go against the—they were unbelievable. Now, where the heck was Hadamar? I'll go through this carefully. I can always get back to you.

MH: Do you want to go through it and then I can call you back later? Or I can call you tomorrow? Would that be better?

HC: Maybe—would it be any help to you if I had a lot of this photocopied and sent on to you?

MH: At this point, not right now, because what I'm really looking for are your personal recollections. And, I mean, it's important to me to talk to people like yourself who were there, and even those—

HC: Now, one thing—it's been what, sixty-some odd years?

MH: Yes.

HC: Right, sixty-some odd years. And you just maintain so much. Well—

MH: Let me—put the book down for a minute. Let me just take you back to Hadamar for a second.

HC: Okay.

MH: Do you remember coming into the town there?

HC: Well, you know, going into Hadamar, we were going through so many German towns with the white flags that—specifically, I do remember going through a hospital with one of my guys and my tank. And as I said before, we were looking for hidden weapons.

MH: Right. Was the wall already breached by the time you got there? 'Cause there was a gate there.

HC: Oh, well, you know. There was a gate. I do remember “*Arbeit macht frei*”—work makes freedom—on the gate. They had a gate there when I went through. I was with a couple of other guys from my outfit and having—speaking broken Yiddish—

MH: Right.

HC: I was able to contact with—I did ask a bunch at first, “(inaudible) *spreken ze Yiddish?*” And they all came running over, 'cause they were all Jews.

MH: This is in Hadamar or Dachau we're talking about?

HC: No, that was Dachau.

MH: Dachau, yeah. That's why I want to keep you on Hadamar for a minute.

HC: Okay. Keep me on there. I'm going through—

MH: I'm just trying to get you to describe the hospital that you saw. See, I have a feeling that the infantry guys—

HC: Well, you know, Dachau, from what I can remember, was also used by the Germans to experiment on Jews.

MH: Right, but let's go back to Hadamar for a second. (laughs)

HC: Yeah.

MH: We'll get to Dachau. At Hadamar—I mean, do you remember going into the hospital there?

HC: I remember going through that hospital.

MH: What did you see?

HC: Well, they were—this was a hospital for wounded Germans. This was not a hospital for a concentration camp, because, look, none of them would have had—

MH: Hadamar was one of the euthanasia hospitals.

HC: Yup, yup.

MH: It's where they were—they were killing people that weren't fit to live, according to their standards. So, that's why I'm asking you what you remember seeing. Do you remember seeing crematoria?

HC: No, the crematoria that I saw was in Dachau.

MH: Was in Dachau. Did you go up on the floors in the hospital and see people in the beds?

HC: Well, we just, you know, ran through, making sure that we weren't going to get hit in the back by some of these SOBs.

MH: Right.

HC: Oh, wait, wait. Here we are. "Finally, the road swung off the autobahn and the division assembled in the goose egg between Westerberg and Hadamar. Most of the units bivouacked in the fields that night." Let's see, where else is Hadamar mentioned? Oh, here, here's something. Here's something. "Facts were just released about the mass murders at Hadamar insane hospital, where Nazi doctors experimented with injection deaths. Large numbers of the division personnel visited there to see the inconspicuous hospital above the ancient city. They saw the neat grave markers supposed for only one body each, but under which ten to twelve victims had been buried: Russians, Poles and Germans. As usual, the townspeople didn't know about it, they claimed." Yeah, *nicht wissen*; I heard that many times.

MH: What is the phrase?

HC: What was that?

MH: What is the German phrase? *Nicht* what?

HC: *Nicht wissen*. When you asked them about what was going on, and they didn't know a thing about it, supposedly. And I do remember once, I said, "Yeah, but *kannst sie nicht schmecken*? Can't you smell?" But I think that was not Hadamar. That was Dachau.

MH: Yeah. But the phrase is *nicht wissen*?

HC: What's that?

MH: *Nicht wissen*?

HC: *Nicht wissen*, "don't know."

MH: “Don’t know,” got it.

HC: Don’t know.

MH: How did—in the face of what you knew the truth was, how did you feel when you’re talking to German citizens who tell you that?

HC: What, with the German civilians?

MH: Yeah.

HC: Well, you hate the bastards. I mean, we weren’t going to do what the Germans were doing. There was one incident when I remember—well, you know, we wanted to have dry—our division and we wanted to have roofs over our heads, and we threw out the Germans from their house. And in one instance, this guy comes down and says, “*Meine Frau ist krank*,” my wife is sick. And I think I said something like, “*Meine meinchens einen tot*,” my people are dead, or some words to that effect. Some things stick with you; and that must have been outside of Dachau.

MH: You—

HC: But yeah, this was a part of Hadamar that I was telling you about.

MH: Right.

HC: “As usual, the townspeople didn’t know about it, they claimed. It was a nice little town, too. The tightly packed brick front houses were reminiscent of sections of Beacon Hill, Boston. 20th soldiers decided the cover didn’t prove the contents of the book.”

MH: Right.

HC: “Burnt out and wrecked German vehicles spotted the area, and the curious investigated.” (inaudible)

MH: So, you mean they treated the SS officers well.

HC: Yeah. Well, I mean, we weren't supposed to do what sometimes we had to do.

MH: Right.

HC: Or what the Germans had to do.

MH: Okay.

HC: Or what the concentration camp inmates had to do.

MH: Right. Let's talk about Dachau now. When you came—

HC: (inaudible) This phone is now going dead. Can you hear me?

MH: I hear you fine.

HC: Wait, wait. Let me—(changes phones) Hello?

MH: Yes.

HC: Okay. Okay.

MH: When you got to Dachau, do you remember what time of day you got there?

HC: Oh, impossible.

MH: Were the—

HC: We had—you know, in our division, we had patrols out all the time. I couldn't possibly remember.

MH: Okay. Did you—were you going in with the 42nd or the 45th?

HC: Support then, I think, was with the 42nd. You see, the Rainbow Division had a habit: When they went through a town, they painted their rainbows over the highest part of town to show that they were there first.

MH: Okay.

HC: But, look. More power to 'em. They were a good—they were a New York state division.

MH: So, when you got to Dachau, did you see the train that was outside?

HC: (sighs)

MH: That's what I thought.

HC: Well, personally, I didn't, but I know there were trains packed with either dead or just about almost dead, waiting to go into the ovens.

MH: So, you were still on an armored vehicle.

HC: Oh, yeah.

MH: Okay.

HC: Yeah. No, I was with 'em until my discharge in forty-six [1946].

MH: Okay, but—

HC: As I told you, we were supposed to hit Japan.

MH: Right, okay. But you get to Dachau.

HC: Right.

MH: It's April—probably April 29, which is when the 42nd got there.

HC: Could very well be.

MH: Okay, what do you remember seeing? What's the first thing you remember?

HC: (sighs) Piles and piles of people. Dead. Unbelievable.

MH: Did you go inside the camp through the gates?

HC: Did I go inside? I must have. I must have. You know, we were stationed outside of Dachau, and I guess we were getting, not reinforced because the Germans were just about out by then.

MH: Right.

HC: But (laughs) what can I tell you? What can I tell you? You know—

MH: I mean, you saw what happened there.

HC: Oh, absolutely.

MH: Did you get to the crematorium there?

HC: We—yeah. In fact, they had more than one, if I remember correctly.

MH: Right.

HC: I think they had two or three.

MH: So, you went in there.

HC: Well, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, we went in. I mean, the guys were unbelievable. You know, being Jewish, I guess they had a special feeling, knowing how I felt—well, how I felt. I cried like a baby. But it's the most awful thing in the world.

MH: Did you talk to any of the inmates?

HC: Yeah. In fact, what we did—you know, we ran out of food, and I remember collecting whatever canned foods we might have had from packages home and bringing it over to 'em. And, of course, they grabbed it. But then, a couple days later we had some organization and were able to feed these poor SOBs.

MH: Mm-hm.

HC: Yeah. Oh, well—

MH: Were you—I'm just curious. When you see people in this kind of condition, they certainly don't look healthy. Were you concerned about being in contact with them?

HC: Concerned about being in contact?

MH: In physical contact with them. I mean, there was disease—

HC: Oh, of course! There was, if I remember, typhus and a lot of diarrhea and a lot of—well, yeah, what contact? You didn't embrace them or anything like that.

MH: But did you actively have to push them away?

HC: You mean as far as them being so—

MH: As far as them being overjoyed to see you.

HC: Enthusiastic about—

MH: Yeah.

HC: I don't—I can't remember.

MH: Okay.

HC: I know there in certain parts of the camp they had some youngsters, too, some kids. You know, wearing the striped uniform.

MH: Right.

HC: Yeah. Concentration camp uniform. I don't know what it was.

MH: What—how do you deal with a scene like that?

HC: In what (inaudible)?

MH: Emotionally, yourself. How do you keep it from tearing you apart?

HC: You just go out of your mind. I'll tell you something: if I keep talking to you, I'm gonna start bawling like a baby.

MH: Okay. (laughs) I'm sorry.

HC: No, no, no. It's not good. I'll tell you, my son-in-law said to me the other day, "You know, maybe you should start dictating your thoughts." Look, I'm eighty-four years old, eighty-three, eighty-four years old. So, maybe your novel will—you're lucky. And millions and millions of people know what went on. I mean, maybe not to the extent I was involved, or my guys were involved, but it's unbelievable. You know, you go to Yad Vashem—you're Jewish, aren't you?

MH: Yes, but I've never been to Israel, I guess. But I am Jewish.

HC: Okay, okay. Do you speak the language?

MH: I can read Hebrew, you know—

HC: Oh, terrific.

MH: Like most boys who've been bar mitzvahed: we can read it, but we don't necessarily understand it.

HC: I understand. Well, no, I can't read. My mother and father spoke Yiddish quite a bit of the time, so I picked it up. And this is—I was the so-called battery interpreter, and—yeah, well, look, whatever. Yeah, we talked to these poor bastards. I mean, it was unbelievable.

MH: When you came back, did your family ask you about what you had seen?

HC: What my father did when I came back, when I was discharged in forty-six [1946], he took me to the rabbi. The rabbi—Orthodox, I guess, and of course he wanted to know what the situation was as I saw it. I couldn't go in to detail—of course, it was still too fresh—and I gave him a general picture of the horrors and that was it. You know, I'll tell you something. I'll tell you something, Mike. You know, you say man's inhumanity to man. This was past that. And we're going through a very similar situation—not as bad, but—(sighs) what can I tell you?

Look, if there's anything else that I can do for you—when is the book going to be published?

MH: The book won't be published until early 2010. I mean, I just really started working on it about two months ago.

HC: I see. You're doing your research.

MH: I'm doing the research. The things you saw—what did you do when you came back? What business were you in?

HC: Insurance. Ocean marine insurance.

MH: Oh, okay. Um—

HC: Oh, I'll tell you something. During my—when I was—brokers—since we were a specialized line of insurance, brokers would come over from Germany. The president of my firm—they would come into our office and he would make sure that, when the Germans were there, I was there. He was a captain. He was wounded, I forget where in Europe, but he had a very bad leg wound and he limped like the poor son of a gun that he was. But no, he would want me to listen to the guys and then he would kick them out. But what good did that do? It's just (inaudible).

MH: Did you ever have nightmares about what you had seen?

HC: Good question. Good question. You know, it's there. It's there all the time.

MH: How does it come up, though?

HC: Well, you know, you read what goes on in the Mideast and this SOB from Iran [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad] who denies the Holocaust ever happened. Well, this is just recent, but in the past sixty years, good question. It was always there. It was always there. But, you know, you've got to live on with what you're doing, making a living.

MH: Yeah. Did—you were married?

HC: What's that?

MH: You were married?

HC: Well, not during the war.

MH: No, I mean later on.

HC: Well, I've been married sixty-one years.

MH: Ah. Did you tell your wife about what you had seen?

HC: She knew. Every now and then I would make some remark. She was aware of the fact that I was—well, I was involved, and that it bothered me and will always bother me, and it's not good. In fact, all right, another one which might have nothing to do with it. We went back. I went back to—we went back to Europe on a tour on the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, and I went back to Dachau. I went back there, and my wife was with me, of course. And where they—(laughs) this is really—where they had the ovens and all that, they evidently removed the ovens, but they had all the barracks and what have you. And of course, running around the place, as if nothing ever happened, there were German school kids. This is where they were taken as part of a tour. It was really something.

MH: They thought it was a park.

HC: What's that?

MH: They thought it was a park.

HC: Oh, of course. Look, I'll tell you: if I think of anything pertinent, I have your number, and I'll give you a call.

MH: I would appreciate that. Do you have any photographs of yourself over there, from the war?

HC: I do. I think I have—oh, in fact, I have a photograph [of] Berchtesgaden. That was Hitler's—

MH: Right.

HC: Yeah, Berchtesgaden. And, let's see, what other place did he have—his palace—not palace, but his—yes, I do have some. Let me go through them and see if I can have copies made.

MH: Okay. All I need is one good one of you.

HC: Well, now. I have one; it's a brown sepia.

MH: That's okay.

HC: All right. Let's see if we can find something.

MH: Okay. All right, thank you very much.

HC: Take care.

MH: Okay.

HC: Lots of luck.

MH: Thank you.

HC: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview

