

Transcript:

Robert Mamlin

A16

24m50s

Interviewer: All right sir, here is what we're going to do. We're going to talk for just a few minutes about your military background. I noticed on here you said that you were actually told that Dachau was a camp where Jews were being held captive.

Robert Mamlin: Well, I already knew it because being brought up in New York, that's where I was born, so the Jews in New York knew what was going on.

Interviewer: OK. I definitely want to talk about that because so far you're the only liberator that had any information. I would like to talk to you about that. Initially, I'd like to just talk to you about, a little about your family, where you grew up, your military, where you drafted, did you join, a little bit what you did in the military and then we'll go into Dachau.

Robert Mamlin: Sure. Now, originally when I was a boy, 17, 18 years old, I wanted to be a history teacher because I'm very interested in history. But of course that was not to be because I was... My first year college, when I was drafted into the United States army. I was drafted. I did not enlist. And, I was sent to Southern army camps for my basic training. After the basic training, I was sent to Europe to join the United States Third Army under George Patton. Under Patton, I fought in four major battles in the European theater including the Battle of the Bulge. And of course, as you know I was one of the liberators of Dachau concentration camp. As I told this gentleman over here, I was there about maybe a day and a half because the war was still on. We liberated Dachau, it was about the middle of April 1945. The war was over in May 8th of 1945 in Europe.

Interviewee: Tell me a little bit about your military service. What did you do?

Robert Mamlin: I was an A9 tank gunner. Now, what an A9 tank gunner does... It's a 57 A9 tank gun. It's like a small artillery piece. The purpose of the 57 A9 tank gun, which the army national doesn't use now was to destroy German tanks and pillboxes. Actually, I was an infantryman but not really an infantryman; we were attached to the infantry. Whenever the infantry got into trouble, they saw German tanks; we were with them at all times. Wherever the infantry went, we went. And when they were in trouble, they called on us to destroy German tanks. Either with a Bazooka, which we had Bazookas also. But of course, the A9 tank gun would be the little artillery piece did destroy the German tanks and of course, the pillboxes. Now, I could tell you a little story, if you're interested in it. The war was over in May 8, 1945. My knowledge of Yiddish, because I was brought up in New York, my grandmother thought me Yiddish. It actually saved my life. Not many soldiers can say Yiddish saved their life. And this is the way it saved my life. After the war was over, I was made into an interpreter because the army was in real need of interpreters. They didn't have too many. And any of the Jewish soldiers, they tried to talk into being an interpreter. I knew Yiddish and I did take a little German in high school, why I don't know. Anyway, I could make myself known to the Germans, so they made me interpreter. And as the war was over, we went to Linz, Austria. And the lieutenant colonel in my outfit needed to talk to the burgermeister, the burgermeister is the mayor of the town, on army business. Naturally, he couldn't talk German, so he called upon me to help him with the interview with the burgermeister. At that particular morning, my unit consisted of 10 men, went down to the river to wash our artillery piece, the 57 A9 tank gun. Now, you know, the war was over, we didn't have too much things to do, so we went out to the river to clean the gun. I was not with them at that time. Nine men went to clean the gun. Someone inadvertently left a round in the chamber and someone touch off that trigger, and what happened, it exploded and nine men were killed, eight men were killed, excuse me. Eight men were killed and one man was left without an arm and a leg. Now, I would have been there if it weren't for my knowledge of Yiddish, they made me the interpreter. So, that one morning, I was not with my unit and that was the morning that tragic accident happened. So, you know, I consider myself lucky.

Interviewee: Sure. Tell me about Dachau. You said you knew growing up in New York.

Robert Mamlin: Yes, of course, I didn't know that much but of course, you know, the Jews in New York were very worried about the concentration camps and what was heard of it. And of course, when I went into service, I didn't expect to liberate Dachau.

Interviewer: What did you heard? What did you hear? You said you'd heard about it. Did you hear that there was...?

Robert Mamlin: Oh, the horrible things going on. Actually, we didn't know that crematoriums and gas chambers, that's what we heard. We didn't know. But of course, I actually saw it. And of course, what I saw not many men alive can say what they saw like I can. Because the people themselves that were there, the survivors, naturally they knew what was going on. But I saw women holding their children in half buried dirt, dead. I saw the crematoriums, gas chambers, they had left there their pitiful shoes and rags and they thought they were going in to be cleaned and that's what they did. And one of the worst things I saw, I don't think many people saw. I actually saw lampshades made out of Jewish skin. Now, I don't hear too much about these lampshades. And the one who did it, her name was Ilse Kochs. She was in charge of picking out the Jews whose skin was going to be used for those lamp shades. Unfortunately, she was still there when we captured, when the camp was liberated. Most of the soldiers were gone because they were afraid of Patton. The moment they heard, at least the survivors who I could talk to because I could talk a little German, the moment they heard Patton was coming, they were scared. The survivors told me, they heard that soldiers in the SS troop was saying, Patton is coming, Patton is coming. They knew the Third Army could destroy them, so they left. There were not too many soldiers there when we entered the camp. You realize how happy those people were when they saw the American division enters the camp? They were saved. In their wildest dreams, they never thought something like that would happen. They were jubilated.

Interviewer: What was the date of liberation?

Robert Mamlin: Now, I can't remember the exact date. I would say it was sometime in the middle of April. Maybe April 15th, maybe April 12 , but of course, I didn't keep the date. I didn't think I was going to be interviewed 57 years later.

Interviewee: I spoke to a survivor yesterday; he was from Dachau who said April 11th is his second birthday.

Robert Mamlin: I was pretty close.

Interviewee: You were very close.

Robert Mamlin: I said it was about around April 15th, 12th.

Interviewer: Exactly close. He said April 11 is a birthday for him.

Robert Mamlin: I could have realized that.

Interviewer: It's more important to him than his real birthday, because it was in essence the birth of his freedom. First, it's just his birthright for showing up.

Robert Mamlin: That's right.

Interviewee: How do you feel about comments like that?

Robert Mamlin: It makes me feel good. It makes me feel good that I could liberate other Jews. As a matter of fact, I was talking to a young fellow at the camp. He was a survivor. He survived by his wits. His entire family was killed. He just managed to survive. He knew what he was doing and he said he could not imagine that there were Jewish soldier in the United States army. It was beyond his comprehension. He never realized that some Jewish soldiers would liberate him.

Interviewer: The Jewish liberator we spoke to yesterday said that he struggled, of course, as a liberator and seeing the atrocities, the natural human feeling of pain and anguish when you see such a thing. But the added component of being Jewish was very difficult for him because he realized in essence had it not been for geography, it would have been him. Did you have feelings like that?

Robert Mamlin: I would say that I felt deep feelings being a Jew to liberate other Jews. And, I've always heard as I said in New York about how the Jews were being destroyed by Hitler. So, it gave me satisfaction that I was one of the first ones to liberate Jews. And that still stays with me.

Interviewer: Did you know you were going to be that one or was it just sort of serendipitous that you wound up being that one? Were there any extra measures or anything you had to do to be the one to...?

Robert Mamlin: No way, no way.

Interviewee: Just by luck?

Robert Mamlin: Just came by luck that I was there. It just came my luck. And there weren't too many Jewish fellows in my outfit. As a matter of fact, I remember, when I was a soldier in the States, when I would take off Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there's a bunch because I don't want to be prejudice now, but there's a bunch of Boston Catholics in my outfit. And they were mad as heck at me that I would take off at Christmas, Easter or all the religious Christian holidays and they could not take off on the Jewish holidays. That always stuck with me.

Interviewee: Do you think that, where was I going with that. Being there and coming home, is there any experience from the actual Dachau, other than the whole experience as a whole. Was there anything within that experience that you remember most? Any one inmate, any one experience, any one feeling that you hold on to more than another?

Robert Mamlin: Well, of course, it's been so long ago. My feelings, I always remember them but I went on. And this young boy that I mentioned, I always think about his life will be so much better now than it was if he wasn't liberated. He probably would have been dead. He probably would be dead now, I don't know. He was about 14 or 15 years old. I was a young kid myself. I was about 20. I didn't have too much worldly experience.

Interviewer: Do you think about him now?

Robert Mamlin: I don't think... Well, if I were to go back to think of a person, I would think of him. And of course, the few raggedy survivors, you know. It was pitiful. And of course, I went on to Campbell which I told this gentleman about and I was almost discharged by the end...I lacked a few points from being discharged, so they send me to Campbell because I came back to the States on emergency furlough. My mother was dying and of course, she died before I returned to the States. She had a bad heart. And they sent me to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. At that time it was Camp Campbell, Kentucky. It was not a Fort at that time. And of course, I had a furlough into Nashville and that's when I met my wife.

Interviewer: You met her here?

Robert Mamlin: I met her at the YMHA, the Young Man Hebrews Association. And when I walked in, I saw the most gorgeous blonde with a figure to die for. I said to myself, "You know, I can't believe that they made Jewish girls look like that." The Jewish girls I had known in New York, in Brooklyn never looked like that nor anywhere else.

Interviewee: So you met her and you've been...

Robert Mamlin: Her family has been here since 1861.

Interviewee: Wow.

Robert Mamlin: So she's really an original Jewish family. Her family came the first year of the Civil War.

Interviewer: What's her name?

Robert Mamlin: Miriam Belle Mamlin. Her name is Miriam Belle Wise. The Wise family. They came very early.

Interviewer: A long time.

Robert Mamlin: A long time ago. Her daughters who are 5th generation born here in Nashville, but they did something terrible. They fled to go to Yankee Land. They broke the chain. And as a matter of fact, we're going to New York this coming Friday for my wife's birthday. I won't tell you how old she is but it's not hard to figure out. She's 57. She has a 55-year-old daughter. So, I'm not going to tell you how old she is but it's way up there. And of course, we're going to New York to celebrate her birthday because our daughters will be there. Her birthday was July 31st, but we didn't go July 31st because one of my daughters could not be there then. So, now, we're going to celebrate in New York.

Interviewee: What do you think when you look back on this experience? I know I just told you about within the camp but when you remember it, what do you remember most? I know you talked about their tears and that feeling of, I mean, finally vindicated, you know.

Robert Mamlin: What I feel is how the world, people can be so vicious to other human beings. You know, I understand war time, people get killed. And I understand bombs and so forth but how in the world you can do these things to human beings. And when the German people tell me because we've been back to Germany, Austria, on a vacation and when they tell me they didn't know anything about what Hitler was doing, as far as I'm concerned, it was a lie. How in the world could he have done what he did? And Dachau was 14 miles from Munich. Now, we went back to Munich about five or six years ago on a vacation, Southern Europe and I would not go back to Dachau. Dachau is 14 kilometers from Munich and I would not go back. And as I say, these civilians had to know what was going on. There's no way that Hitler could have done what he did without the help of the German population beside the SS troop, beside the army. The civilian population had to help them and to me I always have in my heart, you can't blame the current population of Germans. You can't put the sins on the fathers. That's why I feel like... We were in Pearl Harbor one time, we took a trip to China, we stop over at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and I went to the Arizona Memorial. And of course, at the Arizona Memorial, thousand naval men were drowned when the ship was sunk. And here, we're throwing leis into the memorial. I see Japanese doing the same thing. I said to myself, I can't blame them but it's their parents and grandparents who did this and now, they're throwing leis into the memorial. I didn't like that but that's life. As I said, you can't blame them for what their parents did...

Interviewee: Is there anything else you want to add, anything that you remember? What do you tell people when they ask you about that? You said, "how could people be so cruel?" Have you ever been able to understand it?

Robert Mamlin: No, I never could understand. I just don't understand. I could slap on the face, that might be cruel but I'm not killing you.

Interviewer: No, but Joseph will get you.

Robert Mamlin: I don't think I will. I'm a very mild man.

Interviewer: Joseph, do you have anything you want to add?

Joseph: I can't think of anything. No, I can't but thank you very much.

Robert Mamlin: Of course, I told people what I've seen. As I told Joseph, I've given talks to high school kids anywhere from the age 12 to 15 here in Nashville. I've done it in Kansas City where one of my daughters lives. I spoke to their temple. I've done it in New York where my other daughter lives. I spoke to their temple. These kids anywhere from the age of 12 to 15. They're very inquisitive. As you know, a lot of people don't give a darn about what happened. These kids take an interest. They ask questions and I can't stand these people who do deny there was a Holocaust. I want those BS to look me in the eye and tell me there was no Holocaust. I'll call them like damn liar.

Interviewee: What do the kids ask you? What do you think they want to know the most?

Robert Mamlin: Well, they want to know how people were killed. They can't understand mothers being killed. They can't understand putting people in crematoriums, ovens. They ask me very interesting questions. How long I was in the army, whose army was I in, how long was I in Europe, when did I liberate Dachau? They ask me very good questions.

Interviewee: Anything you could never answer?

Robert Mamlin: Well, I do the best I can.

Interviewer: Did they want to know how it could happen?

Robert Mamlin: They want to know how it could happen. How could I tell them because I don't even know how people can be so vicious.

Interviewer: You know, Daniel Goldhagen, he's an author, calls the neighbors, friends and countrymen of Germany the non-Nazis. He calls them Hitler's willing executioners because he said they chose without orders to turn their back on the Jewish people. Do you believe that?

Robert Mamlin: Yes, I do. And of course, not only that but how about the clergy. How about the Pope and how about one man who the Jews consider their savior in the United States.

Interviewee: Would that be Franklin...?

Robert Mamlin: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When I was coming up, Roosevelt was the savior to the Jews.

Interviewee: Friend to the Jews.

Robert Mamlin: Friend of the Jews and look what he did. He turned his back on that ship St. Louise. A thousand Jews tried to come into the United States and the secretary of state happened to be a native to Tennessee, Cordell Hull. I don't know if you ever met with Cordell Hull. I don't know this for a fact that I've been told that Cordell Hull was anti-Semitic. I don't know that.

Interviewer: You said they both had a role in denying the bombing of the railroad to Auschwitz.

Robert Mamlin: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: They chose not to do it which could in essence have saved hundreds of thousands of Jews.

Robert Mamlin: By the same token, Roosevelt had Jews in his cabinet. Rosenman, I think his name was Sam Rosenman was one of his main advisers and Henry Morgenthau was Secretary of the Treasury. I don't know. I just recently read an article in the Tennessean and made me very disappointed. I always consider Harry Truman, I guess you read the same statement. I even went to his home, one of my daughters lives in Kansas City. I made a special effort to go to, Independence, where his memorial is and hear what he did. And of course, he was a friend to the Jews. He was the first one to recognize Israel and so forth. The reason why I thought, the wonderful things about Harry Truman is because I always considered him my favorite president. Why? Because he dropped the atomic

bomb. If he did not drop the atomic bomb, I was on my way to the Pacific, he had been spending all this time in Europe and escape with a broken finger and here they're going to send me to Japan? If we try to invade Japan, you'd have hundreds of thousands of American casualties. So, don't let these bleeding hearts complain to me how the atomic bomb destroyed Japanese children, Japanese people. I would rather have them destroyed than hundreds of thousands of American GIs. And that's why I thought so much about Truman.

Interviewee: Oh, this has been fascinating and wonderful. You were a joy to talk to.

Robert Mamlin: I appreciate that.

Interviewer: Does anybody have anything more?

Interviewer 2: I've been thinking more about, have you ran into people who denied your story?

Robert Mamlin: No, I haven't. I haven't. But of course, what I read about all these idiots who denied there's a Holocaust, I've never ran into anybody.

Interviewer 2: I know that you shared the one with the school and to people you talk to. Have you talked to your family a lot about it, to your grandchildren?

Robert Mamlin: Yes, they know about it and so do my daughters.

Interviewee: A couple of the liberators mentioned that when they came back. They didn't talk about or no one believes that the conditions were that bad. Do you think because you were from New York and they already had an understanding, it was easier to tell your family?

Robert Mamlin: As far as my family goes, I didn't do much talking myself until, I told Joseph that, at the 50th anniversary of D-Day. It was 1994, I believe it was. And all these things started coming out. And that's when I opened up. I told my daughters, my wife.

Interviewee: What do you think the 50 years silence was about?

Robert Mamlin: I don't know. There was no conversation about it in the country. It was a dead issue. The only ones who would talk about it were the survivors. They were there; they knew what was going on. But I just didn't think it was important for me to say anything, so I didn't say anything until that 50th anniversary when everything was coming out about the celebration of D-Day and so forth and then I decided I'd say what I did. And of course, I'm on my last days right now, so you know, when you're getting close to that 80 mark, it's bad, bad, bad, bad because in your heart you know numerically how many years you have left. What I do and my wife does, we live for the day. We've traveled extensively the last 20 years anyway, since I've been retired. Now, we don't do that much traveling because we can't walk as good as we used to. And of course, the terrorist and the airplanes and so forth, you know, so we sort of stick close to the United States. We've been all over. We've been to China, we've been to Japan, we've been to Singapore, we've been all over Asia. We've been to Scandinavia, all over Europe, Mediterranean. I'd say one thing, we have seen this world.

Interviewer: That's nice.

Robert Mamlin: I would like to travel more right now but physically, I can't do it like I used to.

Interviewer: Sure. This has been a pleasure. Thank you.

Robert Mamlin: OK. It's a joy talking with you.

Interviewee: Thank you.

Robert Mamlin: And you gentlemen too.