Good morning. My name is Bernard Weinstein, and I'm the director of the Kean college Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Research Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at the Sterling Library of Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Selma Dubnick.

We are privileged to welcome Mr. Henry Butensky, a liberator presently living in Roseland who has generously volunteered to give testimony about his military experience and his witnessing of the liberation of the concentration camps. Mr. Butensky, I'd like to welcome you, and I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about your own background, where you came from, your formative experiences prior to the war.

Well, I was born in Harlem, in New York City, which was a Jewish community in those days. And after two years, when I was two years old, my family decided to move up to the Bronx, New York. Well, we did, and we lived there for many, many years after, spending most of my life there, going to school, to James Monroe High School, then going to work in my father's little shop down on the East Side off Delancey Street, taking the subway train day in and day out.

We had quite a beautiful Jewish home. My mother, aleha hashalom, may she rest in peace, was a saintly woman, and we were seven children, five brothers, two sisters. We were brought up together in a religiously-oriented home. My father was a cantor.

And things were pretty good up until around 1930 when, as everybody else in the country, we also looked for ways to make a living and make ends meet. And things were turned a little bit not so good, but our home was kept intact all through those tough years.

And my mother kept a beautiful Jewish home. They came from Palestine. My other brothers and sisters were born in Jerusalem. I was the first one who was born in this country.

And my early childhood-- I remember it as a very pleasant, beautiful time with normal teenage problems, as every kid has, and so on. I was athletically inclined. I liked to play a lot of baseball. I played some football. But I loved to sing, and it seemed that, from the time I was about five years old, I was singing with all the great cantors of that time around the Bronx, and Brooklyn, and so on. And I loved to sing in the synagogue, and I knew, somehow, somewhere, that someday, perhaps, that I, too, might become a cantor. That was in the back of my mind, although I was going to try everything else before.

But the war came about, and the rumblings in Europe started, of course, with the Kristallnacht in 1933 or '34. I don't remember exact time.

'38, I think, was Kristallnacht.

Or '38, rather, yes. It was 1933, '34 when Hitler got into the beginnings, but '38, with Kristallnacht and Jews starting to be persecuted, my home was a hotbed of discussion, and talk, and so on because we had relatives in Europe. And some were coming here, and they had all kinds of stories to tell and so on. They told about, in Warsaw, the Jewish bench in the schools, where some of my cousins were not allowed to go to school and so on.

But anyhow, we were exposed to a lot of the rumblings and a lot of the groaning that was taking place in Europe at that time, to the point that even I, in 1940, decided that I was going to join the army. But of course, my parents wouldn't hear of it, and they wouldn't let me volunteer. I was only 18 at the time. But two years later, I was drafted into the army anyway at the age of 20 in 1942, and I was sent into the army.

That you heard about what was going on in Europe at that time, in the 30s-- was there widespread concern in the Jewish community in which you lived, or did people tend to dismiss it and think of it as something aberrant or odd that would come to an or--

Well, in my particular case, I had a cousin who married a European woman. He was in the First World War in the American army. He was an American citizen, but he married this Jewish Polish woman in Warsaw. And he had a child

who was born in the States, but she wanted to go back to her homeland. They went back to Warsaw.

But he was a traveling salesman between Europe and the United States, and when he came to the United States, he would stay in my own because he loved kosher cooking and so on. So he stayed in our home. And actually, every evening we'd sit around a table, and we'd ask questions, and questions, and questions. So he was pretty informative about what was going on in Europe.

Subsequently, his whole family-- the complete family was wiped out, but he saved the one boy, Jackie, who got to England and finally came to my home and then was brought up with us as, practically, an adopted son and stayed with us from 1940 on, until we all got married and so on.

But there wasn't an apathy, but I think that everybody was concerned. And we all knew sort of what was going on, not 100%, but we heard it through different people who came back and told us stories and told us this and that. But for some reason, we just didn't know what we could do about it, and that, I think, was the thing. We just had nothing to do. We just couldn't help in any way except through meetings, and protest meetings, and so on.

But those of us in the Jewish community-- and I remember when I was a youngster-- I was 17 or 18 at the time-- from the different Hebrew high schools and Jewish organizations, we went out, and we protested. And we used to go to the German section, around 80-some-odd Street, Yorkville section.

And on Sunday morning, when the kids-- I remember so vividly. The German kids would pile into trucks with their little uniforms with the swastikas on them and the brown shirts, and we Jewish kids-- we were 20 kids against 200. And we would stop them, and try to fight them, and pick arguments with them, and so on. This was our little bit that we could do, but I don't know if generally, over the whole Jewish community, whether there was anything, really, that they could do about it at the time.

What do you remember of the press response, the media response of that time, radio, newspapers, magazines?

I don't remember too much. The Jewish press, The Forward, had quite a bit about the European situation and what was happening. They did. We listened a lot to WEVD with the Jewish commentators. They spoke about it. Rabbis spoke about it in their sermons.

I don't remember too much in the American press, in the English paper, whether they had a heck of a lot about it, except I do remember the plight of the-- I think it was the St. Louis that was sent back from the shores with 900 refugees aboard that, unfortunately, President Roosevelt didn't accept because of Cordell Hull and so on when he was asked to bring them in. I think I remember that in the papers, yes.

Something specific like Kristallnacht-- were you aware of the fact that it was going on?

Yeah, we heard about it. I heard about Kristallnacht in 1938. We knew about it. And most of us felt that all Jews should get out, but how to get them out-- I don't know if we knew how to do that, and I don't know, even, if all the Jews in Europe wanted to get out because they thought maybe it would just blow over and it would be just a passing thing.

Of course, we know better now, but at the time, I'm sure that many, many Jews, even hundreds of thousands of them, could have got out but chose to stay, and it would blow over, and pass over, and that would be the end. But we did hear about it. We knew about it.

Did you have any fears as an American Jew as to what was happening to the Jews in Europe and whether there was anything that could be done through the State Department or any fears that some of this could spill over to American Jews?

I think when I was-- those days, I don't think that the American Jew had the kind of clout or felt that he had the kind of clout, except maybe for Rabbi Stephen Wise, or Hillel Silver, or something like that, who might have had some kind of input-- but aside from them, I don't think the Jewish community had a lot of clout with the State Department or the

government in any way so that forceful things could be done like they have today.

Today it's a little bit different. You have a pact. You have organizations. You have organized Jewish communities together. In those days, it didn't exist. So we were kind of fearful. We knew that if something wasn't going to be done within a short period of time, that the Jews would-- we didn't know to what extent.

Who could ever imagine that six million Jews were going to be killed? Who thought that anybody in the world would do such a thing? Yeah, we thought they would beat them up. Maybe they would not let them into the schools, which we knew that there were special benches for Jews to sit, and some couldn't get into high schools, gymnasium, and colleges, and so on. They wouldn't be allowed to be professionals.

But we accepted that. So Jews have a way of becoming professional in their own way, but whoever thought that such a thing as a daily desecration of human lives would happen, putting people in ovens? Whoever believed that any such thing could ever happen?

How did the broadcasts and speeches of people like Gerald LK Smith, Father Coughlin, people like that who were very instrumental in spreading anti-Semitism in those days-- how did that affect you and your contemporaries? Did you see them as a viable threat?

But you've got to remember that we lived in New York City. New York City had a powerful Jewish community of about two million Jews out of about five or six million people, so when they came to Madison Square Garden and places like that, the Jewish war veterans of World War I and other Jewish groups took to it, and went with bodily force, and caused protests. But that was the extent of it.

The rest of the country-- I don't know in those days if there was maybe three or four million Jews in this country altogether. And two million of them were in New York City, so the rest were spread out all over the country. And I'm sure that through the Bible Belt and down the South and Midwest that Jews would have rather kept quiet because they were in such a minority that they wouldn't even, sometimes, want to know the people that they are Jews.

In New York City, it was a little different. We had a big Jewish community, many synagogues. Anti-Semitism wasn't rampant. The Jews were merchants. That Jews were of stature, doctors, lawyers, professionals, and everything like that. So there was less fear of anti-Semitism, but the rest of the country had something to worry about, definitely.

Let's get back to your joining the army. You mentioned that your family resisted. Were any of your brothers--

No.

Did they want to join it, too?

Well, my kid brother-- the one after me was 14 years older than me, so there was a big gap between him and I because they came to this country in 1920 and son on. I was born-- anyhow, but my kid brother was three years younger than me, so he was a kid. And I was the only one of any age and so on.

And I wanted to join the army because, if there was anything that I feared personally, it was to end up in the infantry and be a mud-slugging soldier. I wanted to avoid that, and I said, gee, if I join the army, I can get into the Air Force, and I'll be the Air Force. I won't be a fly, so I'll fix airplanes or whatever. But it didn't work, and I ended up in the infantry anyway, being drafted two years later.

Where did you go after your training?

In 1942, I trained in a camp in North Carolina then ended up in-- joined my outfit in Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi. And then once our unit was formed, we went up to Colorado for mountain training. And then we went across to California for training jumping off LST boats and into the water with full pack and so on and so forth.

But it turned, out after we finished the training-- we thought surely we're going to the South Pacific, which I dreaded. I wanted to go to Europe. But they called out all the non-commissioned officers. I was a corporal at the time, and they called all of us out and said, only the privates and PFCs would go to the South Pacific. The rest of us went back to Fort Benning to form the 71st Division training to go to Europe, so I ended up going to Europe anyway.

And this 71st Division later became attached to the Third Army. Is that--

Yes, we became attached to the Third Army when-- first, we were in the 7th Army with General Patch, and at the time, General Patton decided that he would make the push through to Berlin and he would go. He said, if you give me the men, I'll go. So we were transferred from the 7th Army to the Third Army, and then from then we went straight through to the end of the war.

Did you have a preference for going to Europe?

I did, yeah. I wanted to go to Europe. I wanted to go to Europe because, first of all, I felt that maybe, somehow I could have something to do with helping the Jewish population. That was in the back of my mind. But I felt the South Pacific was just not my war-- I don't know, for some reason-- that Europe was my war and not the South Pacific.

Were any of these--

Japan didn't have that anti-Semitic tone to it, which it really didn't. And Germany did. I got such a hate on for Germany and for Europe. That's why I felt that I wanted--

It was very personal for you?

Yeah.

Were any members of your family, even distant members, left behind in Europe?

My cousin, Willie Feldman, who served in World War I as an American, married a European woman from Warsaw, from Poland. They had some children. One child was born in the States, and he was maybe a year old when they packed up and went back to Warsaw.

She wanted to be near her family. Her father was a pharmacist in Warsaw, and they went back. And they lived what, from what I understand, was a very nice life, but my cousin, Willie-- he traveled between the United States and Europe, and he was a representative of sewing machines and things like that.

So when this all started, around 1939, 1940, when Poland surrendered and was wiped out, he managed to get his son, the one who was an American, out. The rest of the family was wiped out completely. His wife, the other child, some of my other cousins who were there were all-- well, we never heard from them or about them in any way again.

But he came to the country, to the United States, through England and here, and the boy, Jackie, was taken into our home and then lived with us for many, many years, until he got married and went out of the house. But his father, this Willie, remained with my father-- they had an apartment in the Bronx-- until 1971, when my father-- my father passed away in 1971, and so they were together all those years.

When you got to Europe, in what countries did you go into with the Army.

We started from Camp Old Gold, which was a camp that brought units together, an activating camp, and it was in France. It was not far from Le Havre. We landed in Le Havre. You got to remember, this was right immediately at the end of the Battle of the Bulge, which was December of '44. And we were hustled into the front lines as the tail end of that Battle of the Bulge, and that's when it started the push towards Europe, towards Berlin and so on.

As a Jewish soldier, how were you treated in your battalion, both at home and abroad? Do you have any memories of

that?

Yeah. Jews, according to the higher-ups in the infantry, were not supposed to be in the infantry, or so they said.

Why?

Well, they said Jews were better-equipped, probably, mentally to take better tests and get into the higher-- into Signal Corps outfits, into the Air Force outfits, and things like that. But they were mistaken because there were many, many Jews, although my company only had two Jewish-- myself and another Jewish boy. But there were plenty Jewish boys in the infantry, too.

I can't say that I encountered any open anti-Semitism. Whatever anti-Semitism there was in my surroundings was kind of subtle. But they couldn't deny me, personally, my rank and my stripes being promoted and so on because I took to the army and I took to it with a-- a zeal exactly but knowing that, hey, look, I'm here, I'm going to make the best it, and whatever I'm going to do I'm going to do the best job I know how to do.

As a matter of fact, before I left for the army, my father, who, of course, was not articulate in English-- but in Yiddish, we sat, and we discussed. And I asked him about my tfillin and the food. I said, after all, Pop, I'm going to have this. I'm going to have that.

He says to me, look, you eat whatever you have to eat. Do whatever you have to do. If you can put on your tfillin in the morning, put them on. If you can't put them on, you won't put them on. He says, you're in the army, I want you to be a good soldier. That he expressed to me. He said, I want you to be-- he said, I want to be proud of you, and I want you to be proud of yourself.

And although he was not a talkative man-- but a few days before I went, we had this little talk, which was enough for me to know what I had to do. And that was about it.

Did you have a chaplain?

I did. At the beginning, I did go to the-- it was a Reform rabbi who did his best to try to get the Jewish kids to come to the services. He wasn't successful. I went a few times, but many the kids didn't. We didn't find it-- it wasn't stimulating. It was just a service of repeating words and so on, which I, personally, didn't need because I was a synagogue-oriented person.

But there wasn't discussions and things like that, which-- I was kind of disappointed, so after a while, I didn't go to services in the army. And then overseas, we had one chaplain. He was a Catholic chaplain, and he was the chaplain for our whole unit. Father Gwenevin was his name, a fine, fine man who respected all religions and even forced me, one time, before Pesach-- he says, you know your holiday is coming up. I says, I know, I know. Where are you going to get matzas and this and that? All right, he says. But at least he says, remember your holiday.

Don't eat bread.

And he does-- so he was quite a guy, and I respected him a lot for it.

At what point did your battalion start going into Germany, and what was it like for you?

We started in France, encountering some heavy resistance yet. In France, there was. We went through Nancy. We went through a few other towns that I can't remember their names.

But then there was a point of a town called Bitche. B-I-T-C-H-E was the name of the city, the town, village. It was on the Siegfried Line, which was a tremendous line of defense that the Germans had put up. It was supposed to be impregnable, just one of those that keep the tanks out, of course, and we forced our way into that place.

And from then on, again, we crossed the Rhine and the little pontoon boats. We spent one night in a-- in the big IG Farben industry works. We slept there, which was on the Rhine. It was the town called Ludwigshafen. It was located-- we crossed the Rhine at that point.

Was the IG Farben plant in operation?

Part of it was in operation. We really didn't know because we came in there. Everything was already-- but you could see it was freshly-- papers were strewn all around, and it looked like somebody was there a few days before. But we got in there, and our outfit took that plant.

And then we went on, and we crossed the Rhine. And from then on, it was a daily operation. We were attached to a tank corps. I don't remember the number, the division, the tank, but the General Patton put us on these tanks and made us go on the tanks as they went through. He wanted the infantry to be along with the tanks, and as the tanks spearheaded through, the infantry got off the tanks and got into the woods to clean up the small pockets of SS troops.

There were a lot of Hitlerjugend kids, 12, 14, 15-year-old kids, who were defending, and fighting, and so on. They were given arms and all kinds of arms, weapons to deal with. I brought a couple of things home from the Hitlerjungend that we took away from them and so on. So they were causing us a lot of aggravation, not heavy, heavy-duty fighting but a lot of--

Skirmishes?

--skirmishes. And my company lost quite a few guys just in skirmishing. But we went through, and we started going through-- we were already going into Austria and into that-- I think we were the-- our division was the farthest east division of any division in the country.

We met the Russians in Austria-- it was the Inn River-- probably three or four days before the surrender of Germany. I think the war was over May the 5th or the 6th, and we met them, I think, on May the 1st, something like that.

At this time, had you seen any of the camps or any of the-- either the labor camps or concentration camps?

Yeah. Well, my first exposure to the camps-- although we'd heard about them--

How did you hear about them?

We heard about them through the grapevine, so to speak, the people that brought us, some information. Hey, there are camps, not specifically Jewish camps. We didn't know exactly about that, but we heard that Germany had a specific program of annihilation of human beings, Jews especially.

I think most of the guys, even the non-Jews, knew that Jewish people were being annihilated and destroyed. We didn't know exactly by what means. We didn't know too much about the ovens, and the gas chambers, and things like that. We didn't know about that until after.

As a matter of fact, immediately, as the war ended, my division brought all the GIs into theaters all over there and showed them the pictures of the destruction of the human people in the concentration camps. It was a horrible, horrible sight.

So this was your first sight of--

So my first time that I was exposed was in a labor camp. It wasn't the death camp. It was a labor camp in Wels of Austria. And my company took this big building, and I walked into the building. And in the building, I saw barracks with bunk beds, probably six, seven high. The place was filthy. There was a stench. I almost couldn't stand there, but I was there. And I could see lice jumping all over the place, from the heads of the people and all.

And then one man came over to talk to me, and I was pretty adept at speaking German because I knew Yiddish very well. So I could sort of-- it was compatible, and I could speak. So I started speaking German to him, and he spoke to me. I could tell the way he spoke German that he was as bad as I was.

So I asked him plane. I said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] in Yiddish. And when he heard that, he jumped all over me, and he started speaking Yiddish. He was a Jew.

So the camp had about 2,000 people there. They were strictly working making packages out of wood, wood boxes and stuff for material. But there was about 200 or 300 Jews there, too, men and women, and so on. And a place was just a filth.

What was the condition of the people there?

Emaciated, not quite the way we found them in the camps later on, but they were given a minimal of food, some slush and maybe a soup every day, to keep them because they used them as a workforce. So they had to keep them alive, and they worked, they said, 12, 14, 15 hours a day. All day long they worked.

Were they close in age or physical condition to each other, or did they tend to be more young or much older?

I would say that these-- no, these weren't young. These people were mostly-- the man that I spoke to, I would say, was probably in his 40s. I would say that most of the people there were between 40, 50, something like that, and they were probably in the peak of their health. So they might have just--

You didn't see any young adolescents?

I didn't see any young kids there, no.

All adults?

I didn't see that. So that was my first exposure. And we tried to help them out, and I went back to my shift in the army. And then my outfit-- we got some food together and so on. We left them a bag of food, everything and anything that we could possibly get a hold of. And we brought it to him, and he distributed I would say, to his Jewish friends first, I guess. And that was it. I spent that day there. Then we kept on going.

You told us earlier that he hugged you, that he--

Yes, he did. When he heard that I was a Jew, he came to me, and he took me around. And at first, I was a little bit reluctant because he had rashes on his hands and his face, and the lice was gone. And I was-- not that I was much cleaner. We were in mud places, too, but at least we could wash a little and so on.

But then I said-- and I hugged him, and we hugged each other. And that's the way it was. And we got him as much food as we possibly could, and I had to leave. But I'm sure it was a heartening visit, both for him and for me, that he knew that the Americans, first of all, were there, and, hey, there was a Jew, also, one of his brothers, in the army.

Did he mention to you how recently the Germans who were in charge of that labor camp had fled?

Yeah, they had fled only hours and a day before, yeah.

Do you know where they were?

No.

You never found them?

No.

And then where did you go?

We went on, and we came into another camp. This was some days later. We came upon a camp called Straubing in Austria, and there we saw the horrors of what we had heard about previously through the grapevine. It became an open book for us because there we saw the bodies lying massacred and decimated by hunger and starvation.

We had heard about the striped uniforms that they were made to wear, and we saw it up front, the way it was told. That's what we saw. And there were many, many hundreds, some in trenches. I think the Germans were trying to cover up, so they threw the bodies into open trenches.

I guess they didn't have time to cover them. They didn't have the machinery, the bulldozers or whatever they were going to do. There was just not enough time. I don't think that they thought that the American army was that close or that able. They thought, perhaps, that their army was still strong enough to defend and keep the American forces from coming in.

Had you any idea how recently they had been killed?

The people there? From the reports of the-- as a matter of fact, there was a-- I was very friendly with the battalion doctor, who traveled with us, our headquarters battalion doctor, and I had spoken to him. I was a first sergeant at the time already, so I was in charge of the administration of the company and seeing that the company was fed, and got their weapons, and got their ammunition.

And I was sort of the right-hand man of our company commander, Captain Graham, and so I was sort of privy to some of the inside that they were discussing about. And the doctor was saying that perhaps they died the day before or something like that.

It's possible, and I can't prove it until now. At the time, I didn't do any detective work. The was not my line. But it's possible that the Germans just indiscriminately killed out as many as they possibly could because in the next camp that we came to, which was Gunskirchen Lager some miles away, we found the bodies in the woods, a distance away, probably a few hundred yards, from their barracks.

So we were wondering, why weren't they in their barracks? Why out in the woods? They covered up hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of bodies, probably thousands. I saw-- my perception at the time was--

And they said that what happened was that the victims, the inmates of the camp knew that the Americans were coming, some said within the hours, within a day, and they started running out to the woods, thinking that if they stayed behind they would be wiped out. So they started running towards freedom, I believe, and I think that there were machine-gunned down in the woods and just left there at the time.

In either of the camps, did you see any people who were still alive?

Yes, we saw some that were still alive, but the ones that I came upon that were still alive were really incoherent. And I spoke to one man in Yiddish, and he was in a daze. He didn't know-- I couldn't get from him where he came from. One man said he was from Lithuania. Another person I saw said he was from Poland. It was very difficult to talk.

How many were there, would you estimate?

That were alive?

Yes.

Alive?

Yes.

I guess there were many. I wouldn't say-- there were probably hundreds that were alive, but we were on the go. It wasn't my company's function to go through the detective work in the concentration camps. Within an hour or two, we had to jump on tanks and keep going, and it was left for some outfits behind us to come in and do that kind of work.

How did the men in your unit react when they came upon this?

With a lot of sympathy. At that time, I think, had the state of Israel been a fact or at least been in the works like it was in 1948, I think the American people at the time would have got up and fought for a Jewish homeland. It was very strong.

The guys in my outfit came to me, knowing that I'm a Jew-- and I never hid the fact-- and this other boy, Goodman, Michael, who was a radio operator in my outfit. And we both talked together, one Jew to another, and many of the guys came over and said, gee, we never knew that your people had to go through so much. And they were very sympathetic.

And these were all young men in their 20s. I was only 23 myself. They were 24, 25, 26, and so on. So these were guys who were hardened, tough infantry boys, went through a lot of this war and saw a lot of death. We saw a lot of American boys, a lot of Germans-- we saw a lot of death going through, but I think this moved them, that people were just slaughtered just for being Jewish.

Were there any Germans left in either of these camps?

If there were, I didn't see them. There was some, but I didn't see them. I didn't get near the barracks at all. What I saw was strictly in the woods, that we came upon them, the bodies and then a few stragglers who were walking, who were alive. But I never got far in. There was a few hundred yards back where the offices, I guess, and the barracks, and the buildings were.

And I never got to that, so I don't know if there were any Germans who had given up and stayed behind, or tried to explain, or whatever. This was for the troops that came up after us to do. We just kept on going.

If you can characterize the response-- you said they were very sympathetic, and you said--

The boys in my outfit were, yes.

Were they able to talk about this, or was this sense of sympathy or identification sort of within each one? Were they silent? Did they speak to each other about it?

Yeah, I think it was a kind of a subtle correspondence that they had, but it was not vocal. But as a first sergeant, my job was, besides running the outfit-- I had just gotten in replacements who were kids that came from the States, and the last two weeks or so was their first baptism of fire, so to speak. And so it was my job, also, to calm these 18-year-old kids who had just come from the States, and they were poured into the front lines without even ever hearing a bomb go off, or an airplane strafing, or anything like that.

So I used to get around to my company, and I always had this thing of getting up, either with a Jeep or whatever, to get up to the front lines with the guys, maybe running in-- if we got some rations of candy, or cigarettes, and so on, I'd bring them up for the boys and spread them out, here, this and that.

And so I tried to get around, calm the company down because, at one time, at one point, American planes piloted by German pilots-- they were captured planes-- opened fire on our company. So they almost didn't know if the Americans shoot-- but they captured two or three P-38s. I think it was P-51s. I don't remember the number of the plane.

And they had our planes, and they opened up strafing. And here we were. We were standing out there saying, hey, there's our planes. There's our boys. And all of a sudden, they opened up fire and so on.

So I used to get around, and try to calm the kids down, and tell them, hey, look, don't worry about it, make sure that they dug their foxholes. Some of them were-- they were afraid, especially the young ones, and there was a lot of fear and so on, which was understandable. I had the same fear myself, and I was afraid every minute. But I couldn't show it because I had to put on a front. They'd say, the first sergeant is crawling away, so what do they want from us? So it was that kind of a thing.

But as I went around, a lot of them spoke about, said, gee, we never thought that anything like that went on, that there was that kind of destruction. They said to me-- and they did whisper and speak about some-- and they were sympathetic. I must say that a lot of them, although they weren't vocal and outgoing in their protest, they did express their feelings about what was going on.

And I think it created, at that time, a very sympathetic feeling for the Jews, period, and perhaps that's why the study of the Holocaust and the recognition of the Holocaust, among the majority-- there's still a minority that want to say that it never existed, but those guys who say that never-- cannot tell the 200 guys in my outfit that it never existed because they saw it. And so there's no such thing that it never existed.

Did you know about the major camps, to use a word that is really not appropriate in this context? But I'm talking about--

Dachau, and Auschwitz, and so no.

--Auschwitz and Dachau, and Treblinka, and places like that, the death camps.

OK, the only thing that I know about that is not-- if you want my own personal experience, I have none with that whatsoever. I had no experience with any of the major concentration camps, except the two that I spoke about, Straubing and Gunskirchen, which not only had Jews in it but had other political prisoners and so on in the camps. It wasn't strictly a Jewish death camp as Auschwitz may be or Dachau.

The only connection that I had with Auschwitz and Dachau is that, after the war, after I got married, we became very, very close friends, even to this day, with a man and his wife. She was from Europe, from Poland, but they managed to escape the concentration camps. But they wandered from one town to another.

But Joe himself is a product of the Warsaw ghetto. He was in the Warsaw Uprising and eventually landed in Auschwitz, in the concentration lager and lucky enough to get out.

And we became very friendly on a personal basis with them, and their family, who were close to our age and-- we lived near each other, and their children were the friends of my children. And to this day, 35 years later than when we met them in 1953, we're still friends to this day. And I don't want to mention his name, but he's very active with the Holocaust program in New York. He's a very prominent man, and he's on the board of those organizations.

And to this day-- we were just together Sunday night. We were together at a bat mitzvah. One of the other family's daughter got bat mitzvahed. And so we were there, and he spoke-- and on a personal basis, we would sit and talk, the two of us. Through many, many years, we used to speak about it.

Of course, in those days, when he first came to this-- he couldn't speak English very well, so he found me. And I was a Yiddishist, and I could speak Yiddish. And we were very good, close friends. We went all over together, vacations together, summers with our kids to the mountains, and so on.

And many times, we sat, and talked, and discussed, and he did tell me some experiences of his in Auschwitz and in the concentration camps. To go through the whole story is just a horrible, horrible experience that he went through that he told me about.

He did things that we wouldn't even believe human beings could do, he himself, that he did things. The man is a passive, good, philanthropic human being, but he had to do things as a young man-- he was only in his 20s, I guess-- that only an animal-- a human being that has animal instincts would do.

And he had to do certain things. He expressed to me things, the horrors of the camp and how they chose who was going to die, and who was going to live, and who was going to the gas chamber, and who was going to take a shower. And it was just a horrible thing that I listened to for many, many sessions that we used to speak about, and they weren't very nice.

I've heard several liberators say, as, certainly, many survivors have said, that they found it very difficult to talk to people about what they had seen. Even though the liberators didn't experience those things, many held back for many years before they could come forward and even talk to their own families about these things. Many had nightmares. Did you experience any of this?

I was just thinking about that, Bernie, because it's ironic you should-- the same thing has happened to me. I got in the army. I did what I felt was-- I served an honorable almost four years in the army. I came to be a first sergeant. I worked my way up. It wasn't easy for a Jewish boy in the infantry.

I came home. I got married. I have three children. Do you know that, all through the years, I have never, never discussed my experiences with my kids. I don't know why. Either it was too hard for me to tell them, or somewhere they were reluctant to ask me.

I had my army uniform hanging down in the basement with ribbons, and battle stars, and infantry badge, and everything. Not one of my kids ever asked me what did I do in the war. But I have this book from my division, and it was in the basement, in my basement where we lived for 25 years. And it got flooded, and that book landed in the water and completely immersed in water.

Well, we dug it out and put it aside. But my son, who is now 27, my baby boy-- I guess this was about eight or nine years ago. He was maybe 20. Maybe he was 18, whatever. He painstakingly made a spot down in the basement for himself, and he took every page of that book, and he dried every page out.

It took him-- I don't know how long-- weeks, and weeks, and weeks. And he put the entire book together. I was so moved by that. But he felt it was important to me, and it was important to him that I should have this book intact. And I have the book here. It's 85% in good shape and only because he did the whole-- my wife just put some tape on it, but he took--

And it was a brand-new book. I look at it once in a while. In the back I had-- there was about 18 or 20 fellas that were killed in my outfit, so I opened the book and once in a while-- and I had it checked off, the guys in my outfit, and I looked at it and remembered once in a while. But he took this page by page, and he dried every page out.

Did he ever comment on the pictures?

Then after that, he said to me, Dad, I see these pictures from the concentration camps. Were you there? Did you see this here? And then we had a talk, and he was 18 or 20 years old at the time already. That was the first time in all the years that anybody asked me where was I.

Did either of you express to the other why it took so long for this to come out?

No, I didn't. I didn't ask him. But he did-- the act of putting that book together was enough for me.

Thank you very much for telling your story and sharing it with us.