

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

**Oral History Interviews of the
Kean College of New Jersey
Holocaust Resource Center**

**Interview with Henry Butensky
November 1, 1988
RG-50.002*0031**

PREFACE

On November 1, 1988, Henry Butensky was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein and Selma Dubnick on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

**Summary of the
Interview with Henry Butensky
November 1, 1988**

Henry Butensky was born on August 12, 1922 in Harlem, New York. He was raised in the Bronx, NY. His parents came from Palestine, his father was a cantor. In 1942, he was drafted into the 71st infantry of the 3rd army. He never felt the war in the Pacific was "his" war. Rather he wanted to help fight the war in Europe because he felt he could in some way help the plight of his fellow Jews. He was sent to Europe and landed at Le Havre, France, near the end of the Battle of the Bulge. He was at the I.G. Farben plant following its evacuation. At this point, he was attached to a tank corp. General Patton instructed them to capture young Nazi resisters. His division was sent the farther east than any other. They were the first to arrive at Wels, a concentration camp in Austria. He describes the prisoners' emaciated physical appearance and the filthy and lice-ridden conditions at the camp. He spoke with a prisoner in Yiddish to learn more about the camp itself. Several days later, he arrived at Straubing, a labor camp in Germany, and saw the masses of recently murdered corpses piled in nearby trenches. The next camp he reached was Gunskirchen, Austria. He and his fellow soldiers found hundreds of bodies scattered in the woods near the camp suggesting that prisoners were machine gunned down as they fled into the forest. Henry describes his fellow soldiers as sympathetic to the Jewish victims and shocked at the horror of the situation. Henry only learned of

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Auschwitz later through a friend. He did not discuss his experiences with his children until his son found a scrapbook from his army division.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Henry Butensky
November 1, 1988**

01:00:00

Born in Harlem, then a Jewish community on August 12, 1922. Lived in Bronx, worked for his father on the lower east side. Strong Jewish home. Parents came from Palestine as did other siblings. Only Henry was born in the United States. Father was a cantor; Henry loved to sing. Rumbings in Europe started in 1933. Kristallnacht in 1938.

01:04:00

Many relatives came from Europe. So family was aware of what was going on. Henry wanted to enlist when the United States entered the war, but his parents wouldn't hear of it. Drafted in 1942. Sensed some apathy but mostly his community had a sense of helplessness.

01:07:00

Remembers fights that took place with Bundists. Doesn't remember too much in newspapers, but remembers sermons and radio

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commentary. Henry remembers St. Louis and the tragedy that ensued when the United States didn't accept it.

01:10:00

Doubts even after Kristallnacht that Jews could do anything or that German or Austrian Jews wanted to get out. Little clout with State Department among Jewish leaders. There was no PAC (Political Action Committee) in those days.

01:13:00

No one could conceive that conditions would get as bad as they did; that such atrocities would take place. In places like New York, Jewish war veterans confronted antisemites. That was probably not so in the rest of the country.

01:16:00

Didn't want to end up in the infantry. Preferred the air corps, but got into army. Anyway, because he was a corporal, he went to Europe (PFC's went to Pacific) Joined 7th army, then the 3rd army. Somehow he never felt that the South Pacific was really "his" war.

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01:19:00

One of his cousins who returned to Europe with his Polish wife after living in the United States managed to get his American born son out. Family was all killed.

01:22:00

Landed in Le Havre, near the end of Battle of the Bulge. He was with 2nd battalion, 60th infantry. If there was antisemitism, it was subtle. Took to army with zeal. His father, though religious, recognized realities of military life.

01:25:00

Found religious services in the army unstimulating . His chaplain overseas was Catholic, a fine, tolerant and caring man. Crossed the "Siegfried line" near Nancy, France and the Rhine in Pontoon boats. Was in I. G. Farben plant just after its evacuation.

01:28:00

Attached to tank corps. General Patton wanted infantry on tanks. Wanted them to capture young Nazi resisters. Many skirmishes, but

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filled with casualties. His division was farther east than any other.

01:31:00

His first exposure to the camps was "through the grapevine." Heard Germany had "a specific program of annihilation." Not too much known but the GI's did see pictures. Went first to a labor camp in Wels, Austria. Place was a filthy, lice ridden and had a stench.

01:34:00

Started speaking broken German to a man. Then broke into Yiddish and the man told him about the camp. People were emaciated, kept alive just to work. Those weren't young people; 40s and 50s. Spent one day there.

01:37:00

Man hugged him. They gave them as much food as they could. Germans fled only hours before. Some days later they came to Straubing, Germany a labor camp, where they saw the horrors. This was the "open book": masses of bodies piled up, starvation. Bodies were in open trenches.

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01:40:00

Apparently, they didn't expect to have to flee so soon. Some of the corpses seemed quite fresh. Probably Germans killed as many as they could. In the next camp Gunskirchen, Austria they saw hundreds of bodies in the woods. Germans machine-gunned prisoners as they were running.

01:43:00

Probably hundreds were alive. Much sympathy shown by the American soldiers. Had the State of Israel existed, things might have been different. These American soldiers were hard, tough boys, but this moved them.

01:46:00

Never got near barracks. Didn't see any of the remaining Germans. The correspondences of the eyewitnesses were very subtle. Some of the men were having their baptisms of fire. Germans had managed to capture American planes and were strafing them on the ground.

01:49:00

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Those men could never be told that the Shoah never existed. The camps he was in had more Jews in them. Henry had at the time no knowledge of Auschwitz, Treblinka, etc. He learned only later about Auschwitz from a friend who had survived there. This was a lifelong friend who told him of his experiences as a young man. This friend survived on an animal level.

01:52:00

Through all the years, he never discussed his experiences with his kids. None of his kids ever discussed anything. Book of his division was in his basement; got flooded. His son dried out every page and put it together. Only then could his son and he talk about the pictures.

The act of putting the book together was enough for Henry.