

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Bernard Weinstein and I direct the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at the Sterling Library of Yale University. Sharing the interview with me today is Dr. Mark Lender. We are privileged to welcome Dr. Leon Bass, a liberator of Buchenwald, who served with the 183rd Engineering Combat Battalion of the Third Army of the United States in World War II.

He was at Bastogne, the Battle of the Bulge, during the final assault toward the Rhine. And we are particularly privileged to have him here to tell of his life before, during, and after the war. Dr. Bass, we'd like to welcome you, and I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about your background.

Well, my family's roots go back to South Carolina. It's where my parents were born, around the turn of the century. My father was born in 1891. My mother, 1895. That was a very critical time.

I think it was not too far from the "Emancipation Proclamation" signing, and it was just before, about a year before, the "Plessy versus Ferguson" decision that was rendered by the Supreme Court, which said separate but equal was the way of life in this country. And so it was into that kind of environment they were born, and they experienced a great deal of pain in trying to survive during that period. But they did. They managed somehow.

How did they earn a living and how did they survive?

They worked on a farm. My father had three brothers, and my mother came from a large family of young ladies and brothers, and they worked the land. And that was what, I think, 90% plus did in those days in order to make it. And my father did his bit of sharecropping at that time because was the way things were done.

But after he became part of the armed forces and went with the expeditionary forces to France, he came back a different personality, and he wanted things to change. He didn't want to experience the same kind of discomfort. So he became part of the migration that left South Carolina and went North, and he happened to go to Philadelphia. And it was in Philadelphia that five boys were born. You see, we already had a sister born in the South, but five boys were born in Philadelphia. I was one of them.

Did he ever mention to you what there was in the experience in France that led him to believe that things ought to be better over here? It sounds like the military had some cause and effect relationship there.

Yes. According to my readings, "Black Jack" Pershing didn't want the Black soldiers connected with his part of the Army, so he farmed them out to the French. But I think it's with the French, and by being in France, that he had a new insight to how people think. He didn't have to go around wondering if he was good enough, if he could fit in to the society. They accepted him. This was not true with the American forces. So he came back with a new lease on life.

How long was he in France after the war?

I don't know. I wish I had talked with him more. I regret to this day that I didn't ask him certain questions about his upbringing and about his life, especially the service. But I can only remember those few things that he told me.

But I knew that he came back, and he knew that what was in South Carolina was not for him, and he had to get out of there. And so he came to Philadelphia to fulfill his dreams and make life worthwhile for himself and his family. So we were all there in Philadelphia trying to experience the good life.

Needless to say that separate but equal was pervasive. It was just as operational in the North as it was in the South. And I went to an all-Black elementary school, which was then by design. It wasn't just an accident. It was by design. But it was a good school, and I think that saved the day.

Were the teachers Black, too?

All Black. Principal Black, custodian Black. We had white paper.

[LAUGHTER]

But the school was great. The teachers were really an extension of the home, and they tried to promote those values that my parents were pushing so hard, so that when the chips were down, we would have something on which we could call to help us through. Because you see, my parents, maybe right or wrong, I don't know, insulated us from the kind of pain they had experienced.

We never went back to South Carolina. Never in our whole lifetime did we go back, at least not until Uncle Sam took me back. We were in the North and we stayed there. My parents never dealt with that experience. They never talked about it to us, about the hardships. I guess they figured we would know about it soon enough.

But then, of course, you go to school and you leave the cocoon, and I went to school. And it was there that I discovered a sense of value, that I was somebody, that I counted, because the teachers gave that to us. They shared with us so many good things.

Were there particular teachers or particular experiences in school that you feel affected you?

Yes. Yes. There were quite a few. One I remember is the resource people they would bring to the school. These people went out traveling, and they had contacts with the larger Black society and they would bring in people of stature. And I remember going to their assembly one day and having a woman, a very imposing figure in black with a cane, standing on the stage and talking to us. And she was introduced as Mary McLeod Bethune.

I had no idea who Mary McLeod was. I was only about 10, I guess, when I was there. And she began to talk, and I can't remember everything she said, except one thing, and that is she talked about writing that was done by James Weldon Johnson. And it was "for your arms are too short to box with God." And she stood there, I remember, and her booming voice came out. And she said, son, your arms are too short to box with God. And my eyes bulged. I thought she was talking directly to me.

And it was those kinds of experiences that later on had meaning when I discovered who and what she was and what her contribution was to the total society, not just to Blacks. The total society. And I said, oh my god, what a wonderful experience that was. And I began to hook things together, just like I hooked together the poetry that my father always recited. I never knew where it came from, what it was.

But when I got into college and I began to go through the literature and America lit and in Europe and all the kind of literature around, I discovered what my dad was talking about. He was reciting poetry that he had learned. I guess he had learned it in school because he was a Pullman Porter, who struggled very hard to make a living so that we would somehow have a better life. But he always pushed education. He always felt that that was the key, one of the keys.

Yeah. Where were you in your family constellation? I know you mentioned your sister was the oldest.

I think I was the middle boy. There were five of us and I was right in the middle. There were two older and two younger in the boy group, and I was right in the middle. And life was good. We were poor. It was a depression period growing up during that time. But everybody in our neighborhood was poor so nobody really knew anything different. We all played together and had a wonderful time.

The community was integrated only as far as the merchants were concerned and the few Whites that managed to stay on. But basically, the community in which I lived-- and there weren't too many blocks where there were Blacks, but there were homeowners, as well as those who rented their homes.

At this stage, was the family, or those acquainted with you and your family, was there a sense of an active or growing Civil Rights Movement as the 1930s, particularly during the Depression, advanced?

I think there was a lot of depression, and I'm not just talking about the economic depression. I think that people were depressed, because almost daily you would read about lynchings that were taking place across the country. They're trying to pass an anti-lynch bill. It was having no success. The federal aid education was constantly being sabotaged.

People didn't have much in the way of hope in those days, although there were people who were struggling and who had made their voice heard, such as A. Philip Randolph, who my father talked about and extolled with his virtues because he helped set up--

Your father's union, right?

Yes. The sleeping car porters, he set that up and gave them, for the first time, a voice in the scheme of things. I often hear my father speak of him in such glowing terms, because he had some very difficult times as a Pullman porter. I remember the time he told me that he had cleaned his car, the Pullman car. And he was standing, talking with a couple of his friends outside of the car near the tracks.

And they were laughing and having a good time when the supervisor came up. And the supervisor-- I don't know why. I guess he felt odd man out because he was not part of this jocular thing of having such a good time, and he wasn't a part of it. But he got on the train. And when he went through the train, he came back and he called my father and said, Bass, the car is not clean.

And my father said, I cleaned that car. And I know my father and the kind of man he was. He did things well. And so when he said he cleaned that car, he cleaned that car. But the man said the car is not clean. My father said, well, if it's not clean then it's not going to get clean, because I've cleaned it. And he said, well, I'm going to put you on report. So my father said, you have to do what you have to do.

And so he put him on report. And he was told by the people in the union that if he would just say that he didn't say that, they could get him off. But my father said, no, I said it and I will not lie about it. I'd say if the car was not clean, I was not going to clean it.

And they docked him five years of his seniority. And so my father, instead of having 30 years, when I got to be more mature, he had only 25. And these kinds of experiences stay with me, but I got an insight to the kind of man my father was, and as I got older, I began to appreciate him more and more, even to this day.

Did you experience anything in those growing up years in Philadelphia that made you feel separate or apart from the main society?

Yes. I went to this school where they always taught us to care and love each other, but to also have a love of country. We pledged allegiance to the flag every day, just like every other young person in the city of Philadelphia would do. And we said "with liberty and justice for all," just like everyone else, only to go out and find, as we matured, that that was not so.

Liberty and justice wasn't for everybody. It didn't exist, I felt, for me and mine, as I found out when I went to the theater. I went to a local theater, and when I bought my ticket I was directed to the balcony. Not that there was anything wrong with sitting in the balcony, because I could see just as well there, but it was mandated that I go there because I wasn't good enough to go down on that main floor.

And so I began to get a little insight to the society and how the society viewed me, a person of color. And we always went to the park. Philadelphia has one of the largest parks in the country, Fairmount Park. And out there was an amusement park, which no longer exists, but in those days it was there. I went to Woodside Park, and I recall how I looked through that wire fence at this large swimming pool, which I knew I could never use. I would never be admitted, because the society was saying loud and clear to me that I wasn't good enough.

And these are the kinds of experiences-- there were some others, where people call you names. When you go to use a book in school, you see certain terms in there that turn you off, make you feel depressed. Sometimes you overhear

people that you thought were friends say things that you wouldn't expect them to say, because their racism began to come out and they didn't think that you were around to hear it. Those are the kind of things that make you feel bad.

And this was against a backdrop of the advancing 1930s. You were approximately 20 years old by the time the Second World War had become a reality.

No. I finished school in 1943. I was 18, and that's when I became part of the military.

How did you become part of the military? Did you volunteer or drafted?

Yes. I went out and I volunteered, and I was to go out with the next group. And when I went down to the induction center, institutional racism smacked me right in the face, because the Sergeant was there and he told me to go one way when I went through the door and he told my White friends to go another way.

Because my country practiced, promulgated, and promoted institutional racism, and the military was one of the largest to do just that. And so I went into an all-Black unit, save for the officers. They were White. But all of my comrades in arms at the time were Black.

When you enlisted, did you realize the military was segregated?

You know, you hear, but you don't even think about those things until it hits you in the face. And when it becomes a reality and you see how stark the whole thing is, the contrast, you begin to wonder. And of course, the thing that made it more real, more painful, was the fact that they sent us South. They sent me and those who came in with me down to Georgia.

We went to Camp Wheeler, Georgia for infantry basic training. And I worked on this red clay of Georgia for three or four months, trying to be a good soldier. And I had some experiences that were very denigrating. I mean, really put-down kind of things, both in the military and both in town.

And after the three or four months there, we were told that we don't need infantry soldiers any longer. We're going to make you combat engineers. So we had to start basic training all over again. And so we had to leave Camp Wheeler, and of all places they sent us, was they sent us to Mississippi.

So things got worse. And we spent quite a time in Mississippi, right in Camp McCain, near Grenada. and we spent almost a year there. We went on maneuvers into Texas, Louisiana, and we came back to Little Rock, Arkansas, Camp Joseph T. Robinson.

Now, in all these places, I was given the message of who and what I was, as far as the society was concerned. And it was really frustrating to think that you had made a commitment to your country, and yet your country is saying to you, all right. You're OK, but only so far.

Veritable campaign in the Confederacy is what they gave you.

That's right. They sent us right into the heart of the place where there would be a confrontation. If not verbally and physically, at least mentally you would have this confrontation. I went into Macon, Georgia and attempted to get a drink of water when I was in there, a simple thing like a drink of water. Because you walk around the town and you see it, a beautiful place.

And you walk around, you want to see things, and all of a sudden you see the fountain and you go to drink. And coming from Philadelphia, I had no indication that you follow the signs. I went to drink and someone grabbed me and said, boy, you don't drink here. And he pointed to the sign, which said White, and directed me to another sign, which said Color, where there was another fountain.

And you were, of course, in uniform at the time this happened?

Oh, yes. I was a soldier. Like all the other Black soldiers, we were all experiencing this, and we reacted differently. I was rather quiet and introverted and took my hurt internally. Others would say and do things that got them into trouble and very great difficulty.

Was it your perception, though, that the Black troops generally fully understood the fact that while the rhetoric of the war against Nazi racism and so forth was fine, in practice, the country was doing something entirely different?

Yes. It was as though you were schizophrenic. Our country was two personalities. In one way, we make wonderful pronouncements. We talk about our Judeo-Christian ethics and we're going to make the world a better place for democracy, and all that other jazz. But then when you get down to the real thing and you start seeing the way they operate, things were not in consonance. And so I began to be an angry, frustrated, young Black soldier.

What at that time, say in 1943, before you went overseas, was your awareness of what was happening in Europe, particularly to non-Aryans, to Jews, to gypsies, to other groups?

I had not the foggiest notion about what was going on in Eastern Europe. It had been going on since the '30s. I had no idea. We had all of these orientation sessions, and they said, this is why we fight. And they would talk about these things, but never, never in all the time did they talk about what was happening in Nazi Germany and across Europe.

Why do you think that was?

I can only surmise and guess, hindsight, especially with the kind of information I receive now, is that our government did not acknowledge, even though I felt it knew. It did not come out and say this was so. And so for the Army to teach us that this was going on would really be saying that the government knew. And so we never had that information given to us. At least I didn't. We had heard all about the Japanese and what they were like, but never once did we learn.

Did you yourself have any preference at the time for which theater of operations you wanted to be in, the Pacific or Europe?

I don't think I had any preference at that time. But I imagine I wanted to go to Europe. You read and study and your history is oriented towards the West, towards Europe. And I wanted to see and experience some of the things that I had at least studied about and read about, to go to Paris, to go to London, and to travel across Europe. So I think that was a motivating force for me.

But I think at this time I wanted to get out of the Army. I'm being very honest with you. After my experiences, I really did not want to be in this man's army, especially after having to stand on a bus-- when there were no seats at the back, having to stand up for 100 miles looking at empty seats. That didn't endear me to my country.

Couldn't eat in a restaurant. I had to go around the back and knock on the door to get food. And I'm in a uniform, and I saw POWs, prisoners of war from Germany, being allowed to go in a restaurant and sit down to eat, and yet I was not entitled to that same opportunity. So it left me with a bitter taste, and yet our unit left by way of Boston across the Atlantic and to England, where we spent three months, three wonderful months in England.

You say wonderful months?

Yes.

Is that in quotation marks?

[LAUGHS]

Can you describe the experience of actually meeting the Europeans?

We were bivouacked in a small community called Fordingbridge hence. That's so many miles from London.

I know where it is.

It was a small town, and that's where the 183rd was billeted. And when we were there, we were getting our equipment together during those two or three months. And I had a chance to meet the people in Fordingbridge. Not too many were there. They were mostly older people and very young people, but occasionally there were some younger people there.

And I remember meeting this young lady. And we had a wonderful relationship, and I met her family. And we went to London and saw "Hamlet." John Gielgud played Hamlet at the Haymarket Theater. Nobody looked at us as though we were something weird, different. We were soldiers. We were there to do one thing, and that is to help them get rid of the problem that the Nazis had created for the world.

And so I had a really wonderful experience, but it was short-lived. Our unit left by way of Southampton and went across the channel to Le Havre, France. And then we moved up through France and stopped outside of a small town alongside the road and waited for the orders to come down.

And it was into this environment that we began to understand what war was all about, because the weather was terrible. It had been raining, sleeting, and cold and foggy. And yet we waited, until finally the orders came down and said that we were attached to General Patton's Third Army, and our responsibility was to go to a place called Martelange in Belgium.

It was a small town where a bridge had been blown up, either by us or by the enemy. But there was no bridge in Martelange that would connect the main highway. And we had no idea what was going on at that time because no one had told us that in 1944, around this Christmas season, that the German, in a desperate move to try to win the war, had counterattacked and found a soft spot in the lines and then pushed us back and created a bulge.

Which is the Battle of the Bulge.

And so that's it. We were in the Battle of the Bulge and didn't know it at the time. And here we are, moving up in darkness, in the blackout conditions, up through [? Arlon ?], up to Martelange. And we began to do what we were told to do, and that is to rebuild that bridge.

And General Patton, who's Third Army we were attached to, was coming with the Army divisions-- the guns, the tanks, the men. And all of that was necessary because above Martelange, about so many kilometers, not many, there was a town called Bastogne. In Bastogne, I understand there was a division. I think it was 101st Airborne Division.

101st Airborne.

General McAuliffe.

Yes. Yes, the fellow that said "nuts" when they asked him to surrender. Well, they were all encircled and were told they were going to be wiped out. So forces were being moved, I guess, from many places, and Third Army was one part of that. And we had to get that bridge up so that those army divisions could go cross without having to wait.

And so we worked night and day and we put that bridge up. And we put it up in time so there was no delay. And we saw blood and guts come along there. We saw him with his pearl handle, guns, and that quite an image he gave. And he came through, and those soldiers went up and they really helped save those men.

And it became my first experience with death and dying. See, up to this time, I had never seen anybody even shot or wounded. But here I saw the bodies. On the grave registration trucks, I saw the bodies of people that I knew.

And I remember another time I saw someone I didn't know. He happened to be White. He was about my age and he was on the ground and his eyes were wide open. They were blue. He had blond hair, and his hands were frozen above his

body, because the weather was so cold. He had been alongside the road for a while. And I looked down into those eyes, and I realized that I could end up just like that. And that's when I began to question my wisdom for having joined the Army.

I wanted to know why I was there. What the heck am I doing here when I can't get a drink of water, when I can't ride on a bus, when I can't eat in a restaurant? And here I am putting my life on the line, fighting for rights and privileges that I'm denied.

When you were in Great Britain and you had that hiatus, before moving into the combat zone-- again, it's back to the perceptions of your comrades. Were there comparisons made between stateside relationships? Here you are in uniform and can't get a drink of water, but yet you can attend "Hamlet" with a British woman in London?

Yes. All of these things came across to us as we had those experiences, because we talked. I've got to know quite a few of the young men, and we talked continually about the here and now and about the future, what we would do when it was all over.

And we talked about the civil rights. We talked about the difference. And it made some of them very militant and very angry, and it created problems within our unit, as well as between units. There was not much love lost-- I'm being very honest with you-- not much love lost between the White American soldier and the Black American soldier, especially if there were girls involved.

That created a real problem, to be in a country where the girls were White and here the soldiers are Black and here the other soldiers are White. It created something, because we all brought our baggage from the United States, and that baggage was racism. And the damage it had done to both groups put them at odds with one another, you see.

And you didn't need much to trigger it. And here, of course, white womanhood, that was one of the keys in the whole business of racism. That would certainly stir the pot. And so we did have our problems. And people began to look and compare. And I'm sure my father must have done the same thing. And I knew that when we get back home, you're not going to put them back on the farm, not after they've been all over the world.

Was the experience of being so close to death and seeing death with your own eyes-- and I'm sure others of your compatriots were in the same situation-- did that bring the races, to any degree, closer together? Was there more fraternization in the face of death than there had been before?

I think there were occasions when people sort of transcended the differences and would rise above, too. Those kinds of things that impinged on them, as far as racism is concerned. But it took a war. It took almost death and dying to make this happen.

I recall going to a place and not knowing whether I could get back, because of blackout conditions, and seeing these two soldiers who were White right near the bridge that I had just crossed. I told them which way I could get to somewhere. They said, you're taking a chance if you go. Why don't you come on in here, stay with us. You can bunk with us. And I went inside the room and there were wall to wall soldiers on the floor. And he said, just find a spot, curl up.

War made us somehow forget for a while some of the things that were wrong. But then again, you go back into the areas where people are trying to have rest and relaxation, and then it all seems to come back up again. It's unfortunate.

When you reached France and then into Belgium, did you have contact with European civilians?

Yes, there were civilians there. As I said, most of them were old or very young. I met a young boy named Gustav Shimfessel. He spoke six or seven languages very well. And I could talk with him because he could speak English, and we became good friends. But this is right in the middle, in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge, so I don't know whatever happened to Gustav. I just have a picture of him and I remember him.

The adults were there. They probably were more concerned with surviving. And I recall that I took a chance. One of the

civilians there, in whose home we were stationed and billeted, wanted some gasoline. They needed some gasoline to operate a stove or something. And I didn't think anything of it. I gave them some gasoline from my truck, the can, the large jerrycan.

I poured some gasoline, just a little, a half a bucket for them, and didn't think anything was wrong. And then all of a sudden, the next day there was this big thing in The Stars and Stripes about soldiers who were making money by selling gasoline during the Battle of the Bulge. If I had been caught giving it away, I probably would have ended up in jail. And yet I thought I was doing an act of kindness to help someone, not for profit.

But those are my connections with some of the adults. We were very good friends. In fact, when we came back through Belgium-- on one occasion I had a chance to come back with an officer who was from Alabama. We stopped at the same place. And the lady had us in for a steak dinner. We sat down at the table.

And I recall the lady said that there's no difference, in her broken English. You American. She pointed to the fellow from Alabama, who was White. You American. You a Colonial. See, the only way they understood people of color was from the colonies. There were colonists in Belgian, the Congo.

So I was a colonial. She said there's no difference between the two. He turned red, like a thermometer. And I just sort of chuckled to myself. This was an experience I'll never forget. But yes, I had some contact during the war with adults.

How long were you at Bastogne?

I'm not sure how long that was. I don't think it was too long. It might have been two, three weeks. And I'm guessing. I couldn't say. We moved out all across Belgium, doing various things, putting up other bridges, removing landmines, checking on bridges to see if they were strong enough to withstand traffic.

We went to lots of places. I remember Niederpallen, Wilts, [PLACE NAME], a few other places. It escapes me now. But we went through Belgium and finally into Luxembourg. Then one day we came to a place called Mainz, which is on the Rhine River, and I think it was there that they discovered a pink champagne factory.

As I told before, the group before-- nobody built a bridge that night. It was party time, I guess. But shortly after that, we crossed the Rhine River, and we had to put a bridge across, help put a bridge across the river. And we went across to Frankfurt, and then we went up through Germany.

Given what you would later find in Buchenwald may have an impact on how you perceive things in hindsight, but did you begin to form an estimate of the Germans themselves, both as enemies and as people? And at what point did that begin to gel?

Well, I think I had had an impression of the German soldier as being an excellent soldier, one to be feared if he was your opponent. We couldn't play games. We had to deal with him, and not [? light. ?] The German people, we were not allowed to fraternize, especially during the war. We had not yet won the war so, I didn't get too close to the German people.

Whenever we went into a place, we would say to them raus. That means they had to get out. And we would give them so many minutes to get their things together, and then we would go in and billet, stay there. So I didn't really get to know them very well.

And then the war ended. An I think when the war ended, we became occupation forces. And we were still not allowed to fraternize, but somehow people manage. When there's proximity, you're going to get to know people. And I got to know some, but not enough for me to say that I really knew the German way of thinking and their culture.

I guess at that time, I had such strong memories of what I discovered when I went down to Weimar. We went to Weimar and set up our bivouac area, and then went immediately with an officer, about five of us. We were in the intelligence reconnaissance section of our unit, and we went right to Buchenwald.



And that was the day that I was to discover what had really been going on in Europe under the Nazis. Because I walked through the gates and I saw walking dead people. Seriously, walking dead people. I am not a doctor. I cannot assess things that accurately. But in just looking at these people, who were skin and bone and dressed in those pajama-type uniforms, their heads clean-shaved, and filled with sores due to malnutrition, and here they were coming towards us, making all kinds of guttural statements and using their own language.

And it was very difficult for me to comprehend what was going on. I just looked at this in amazement. I said to myself, my God, who are these people? What have they done? What was their crime? It's hard for me to try to understand why anybody could have been treated this way.

I don't care what they had done. It just didn't grab me. And I didn't have any way of thinking, of putting a handle on it, no frame of reference. I was only 20. So this young man who spoke English began to tell us about Buchenwald.

An enemy prisoner?

Yes. He had not been there, I guess, as long as others. He seemed to be in better condition, but he spoke perfect English, and he was Polish. And so he began to explain to us the composition of this place, that these people were Jews and gypsies, that they were trade unionists and communists and homosexuals and Jehovah's witnesses. There were some Catholics. There had been some mental defectives, but they were gone.

He went through a litany of groups and names of groups, saying that these people had been incarcerated here, because if I could use the term I used before, they weren't good enough, you see. And they had been put here for one purpose, and that was to be worked until they died, or starved until they died.

And I walked around the camp. I went to a barrack. I opened the door. I wanted to go in, but the stench came out, and there was no way in the world I was going to get through that overpowering odor. And so I just stood there. I looked down on the bottom bunk right near the door and there was a man there.

He was skin and bone, and he was on somewhat like a pallet of dirty straw and filthy rags. And he just could barely turn his head and look up at me. I looked into his face, into that skeletal face with those deep set eyes, which I can't forget. But he said nothing and I said nothing to him.

You were part of an intelligence team in your outfit. There was an officer. Had the officer been briefed? Had the intelligence team been told anything?

I can't speak for the officers. We didn't communicate that well. I'll be very frank with you. Not too much love lost between us and our officers, many who were Southern, many who had been damaged by racism. And I guess my own feelings, as a result of racism, caused me to not want to get to really know them. And so there wasn't much communication. So if they knew, I didn't know.

So it was complete, absolute shock, surprise when you got there?

Totally. Totally. And had I been told, I doubt if I could have had, in my mind's eye, envisioned anything as horrible as what I saw.

There had been no talk in the ranks? No word had filtered out?

Not to me. Now maybe there were others who did get information, but I can only deal with myself and some of the friends I knew.

Terms like Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and Majdanek, and places like that were not known to you?

Even when I went into Buchenwald, I had no idea that those places existed. Those names only came to me after I got out

of the service. Later, much later, I began to hear of names and places, and realized that there was more than just a Buchenwald, that there were many, many, many Buchenwalds of different names all over Europe and Russia.

That's what boggles the mind, to think that a group, a society can organize, and do it in a systematic way, such a program to remove from the world a whole group of people, and any others they didn't think were worthy. To me, that was just a little bit much. I couldn't put a handle on that.

But I saw what I saw in the camp, the place where they tortured people and the bloodstains all around and the instruments of torture there, the building where they had all parts of the human anatomy stored as a result of their experiments, really labeled and put in jars.

What reaction were you able to gauge in other soldiers to this?

I can't make an assessment of that. This was a traumatic experience for me. I was going through it as an--

Focused.

I was focusing on how I felt. I couldn't deal with my friends who saw the same thing and what they were feeling. And I know they must have felt something because we never talked.

You never talked about it afterwards?

Never. Never. The only one person I talked to about this was Sergeant Scott that I met when I went down to the Memorial Council, Liberators Memorial Council in Washington. That's where I bumped into him again and we talked and dealt with things we saw and our reaction to the same. And he reminded me of things that I had seen that I'd forgotten. And I know that I went to the--

Was Sergeant Scott White or Black?

He's Black. All Black were in this unit, you see, except for the officers. And so I just got with the photographer and he took pictures of the camp. And he's given me a couple of shots, in which I am a part of it.

And I saw their bodies all around. I saw the clothing of little children, but I never saw any children in that camp. But I saw the clothing piled up in neat piles. And as I said, the bodies were everywhere. And then there was the pile of bodies, about four feet high.

Had all the German military left and all the guards left?

Yeah. Those that got away. I think maybe a few might have been captured. I did see one man. Sergeant Scott was with me at the time, I think, when we saw him. He was being beaten by the inmates. They wanted us to come and join them. Of course, we didn't, but it was my understanding that they beat him to death.

And of course, I never subscribed to that. I think human life is sacred, but I'm not sitting in judgment because I didn't walk in their shoes. But I could not be party to that. I should have said something, though. I imagine my voice should have been raised and said, no, no, that's not the way. I regret to this day that I didn't.

I went into that crematorium, where these bodies were piled up. They were adjacent to the crematorium. I went in there. There were six ovens, six of them. I looked into one. I imagine there were other crematoriums throughout the camp. It was a large camp. But I looked into one oven and I saw the remains there, the ashes, the bones.

Someone said that they took the ashes sometimes and used it as human fertilizer. Can you imagine that, to use the ashes of human beings for fertilizer on fields to grow some crops that you would need to promote the war effort? I saw all of these things probably more than I can remember, but I came out of there sick to the stomach.

And I went to the gate to wait. And we all went back to camp, onboard the trucks in silence. Nobody said anything. And shortly after that, a brief time, I guess, of occupation we were there. And then the war ended and we were told that our unit was no longer needed, and it was disbanded.

You were never debriefed on the experience of Buchenwald? No American officials, officers, civilian, or military ever wanted to know what you had seen?

No. I understand that it was seen by many. I think the president-- not then, he was General Eisenhower-- had brought as many of the troops as he could into the camp to see. And I think this is true of other camps where Americans were in charge. He also asked the Congress to come and the correspondents to come and people in the movies to come and take pictures of this, because he didn't want people not to know.

But nobody ever spoke to us. We never spoke to each other. And when we were disbanded, I ended up in the Philippines. I spent seven, eight months down there waiting to go home. The war had ended in the Pacific after I got down there, so I just sat still and waited, and finally came home. I was 21 years of age.

In retrospect, Dr Bass, have you been able to assess why you, and possibly others, have went through this period of silence, where you couldn't talk about these things to each other? Because I'm sure it must have had an effect on you.

Yeah. That's a hard question to answer because I'm being speculative. I don't want to be a cop-out. I guess I go back to psychology one, where they say things that are ugly and miserable, you somehow push it back in your mind somewhere. You never get rid of it, but you don't deal with it.

That's a possibility. And I think the other possibility is that I got busy putting my life together, trying to do those things that I wanted to do, like go to school, get a job, get married, start promoting my career as a teacher and struggling to become a principal, and all those things. Getting and spending became important. You don't deal with other things, and that's what I did.

What was your reason for wanting to be a teacher?

Well, I think it's when I went to the Philippines. While I was there, believe it or not, I became a company clerk. I guess it's because I was a high school graduate. And in the world of blind men, the one-eyed man is king. So they said, you become the clerk. I said, well, I cannot type. He said, it's all right. You can learn how to type.

So I learned how to hunt and peck in the Philippines. But in the process of filling out the payroll, I discovered that there were young men my age, and even younger, who could not sign their own name. Had to put down an x and have it witnessed by someone.

And I think it was during that time I really came to grips with the fact that if I went back to school, I would like to be a teacher. Sounds strange and weird, but that came to me as something that was important. And so when I came back, I enrolled at West Chester State Teacher's College.

I was a happy, young man to think that I could get into college. And my father was still living and my mother, and I know that they were feeling so proud that I was now matriculating at West Chester. And my father told me I should be a history teacher. I wanted to be a physical education teacher. He said, no, I think you should take history. History is important. And so I became a teacher of history.

And I discovered, though, that the same pain that I left when I left here, the same pain that my father experienced when he came back here, was waiting for me. I came back to this country and I went to school, and I was walking down High Street with some of my White friends. And we went to a drugstore, and we went in. And they ordered coffee and I wanted a glass of milk. There must have been about eight cups of coffee, but no milk.

And the lady filled the coffee, put the sugar and cream in, and kept looking for the manager. And finally she got his attention and beckoned to him. He came over. She whispered to him. And then he called over one of my White friends

and whispered to him, and while doing this, looked right at me. And I knew. My antenna was up. I had been conditioned. I knew that something was not kosher.

And so I waited until finally the fellow came over. And he looked at the coffee and said, let's go, fellas. Come on. And he ushered all of us out. And of course, it was some kind of misunderstanding. The fellow said, wait a minute. Wait a minute. The coffee is there. He said, no, no. We don't want any. He said, why? He said, they didn't want to serve Leon.

Can you imagine? I put in three years of my life, put it on the line, to make it possible for people like that, a young lady and manager, whoever owned that store, to function and enjoy the rights and privileges of Americans.

And they were saying to me, just like the Nazis did, just like they told me down in the South, what they told my father, Leon, you're not good enough. What a damnable kind of thing to say to somebody. Here I am now 21 and back from the wars, and still can't get that relief that I needed.

At what point did you become involved in organized civil rights activities?

Oh, I don't know. From my vantage point, I think just about every Black American, and every American worth their salt, got involved in some way, to some degree. I moved into a community after looking for a house for the longest in the 1950s. I finally found a place which had integrated open housing. It was in Concord Park in Bucks County. Operated by the Quakers, Society of Friends, and Marge Milgram, the builder.

And they put up this place and I was able to get, under the GI Bill of Rights, a home. And I discovered, by talking and living among people who were Quakers, that they put their money where their mouth is. And they did all kinds of things to try to effectuate a change in the society during the era of the Civil Rights Movement.

So I became part of whatever they were doing. And I remember going to that March on Washington, along with so many other 250,000 more people. I was one of them, and what a wonderful experience that was. And I felt that things were going to be different. And I was teaching at an all-Black elementary school when this happened.

I went on this march, and it gave me a degree of hope because I had, coming to my class, about 49 youngsters, Black youngsters from poverty, who were looking to me to give them the sustenance they need so they could make it from day to day in a society that was constantly beating them down economically, but in every other way, telling them they were not good enough. And I had to try to change that.

And then it was when something happened in Montgomery, Alabama. I think a lady named Rosa Parks sat down on a bus. You know the story. I could go on.

It will go on in a few minutes. We're going to take a short break.

OK.