

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

Interview with Leon Bass
March 16, 1988
RG-50.002*0075

PREFACE

On March 16, 1988, Leon Bass was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein 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 Leon Bass
March 16, 1988

Leon Bass was born in 1925 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents worked on a farm as sharecroppers. Leon describes the racism he suffered prior to World War II and during the time he served in the United States Army as a member of the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion attached to General Patton's Third Army. In 1945, he entered the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany and saw "walking dead people." He describes the crematoriums where "the bodies were piled up, the ashes to be used as human fertilizer." After the war, Leon attended West Chester State College. He became a teacher and joined the civil rights movement. Leon also describes additional racist experiences during the generation following World War II. He never spoke about the Holocaust until 1970, when a visit to his school by a Holocaust survivor motivated him to share his story.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Leon Bass
March 16, 1988**

01:01:00

Leon was a member of the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, attached to General Patton's Third Army. His parents worked on a farm as sharecroppers. After World War I, his parents left South Carolina to settle in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "Seperate but Equal," applied to the North as well as to the South. His elemenatry school was all black.

01:06:00

Leon was influenced by his father.

01:11:00

In Philadelphia, blacks had to sit in theatre balconies only, and could not swim in municipal pools. This was in the 1930's. He was born in 1925.

01:16:00

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During World War II, he served in an all black unit. His officers were white. He trained nearly a year in Mississippi and other Southern states. While fighting German racism, he was directed away from white drinking fountains in Georgia.

01:21:00

After standing on a bus for hundreds of miles when there were empty seats in the front and having difficulties entering restaurants, etc., he really did not care to remain in the service. He was shipped to England in 1943, and attached to Patton's army. He was in the Battle of Bulge.

01:26:00

"Not much love between white and black American soldiers, especially when girls were involved."

01:31:00

He had some positive experiences in actual war situations. Problems arose during periods of rest and relaxation.

01:36:00

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In Belgium, his unit put up bridges and removed land mines. Then, they moved into Germany.

01:41:00

There was no fraternization with Germans allowed during or after the war. Consequently, he cannot assess the nature or character of the Germans. Entering Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, he saw "walking dead" people. At age 20, he could not understand what they had done to deserve this treatment. It was explained to him by a prisoner that these "people just weren't good enough", so they would work until they dropped. He could not enter the barracks because of the stench. He was totally surprised and shocked when he entered and saw the conditions.

01:46:00

After he left the service, he learned that there were many "Buchenwalds." He saw the instruments of torture. He cannot speak of friend's reactions. "We never talked." He only spoke to Sergeant Scott, a black photographer in Washington who took pictures of what they saw. "I went into the crematoriums where the bodies were piled up, the ashes to be used as human fertilizer."

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01:51:00

They all drove back to camp in silence. The unit was disbanded shortly thereafter. Nobody ever spoke to them, they were not debriefed, they did not speak to each other. He was then shipped to the Pacific War Theater. After the war, he was occupied with his education and career. He enrolled in West Chester State College in West Chester, Pennsylvania to become a history teacher.

01:56:00

He tells a story of entering a drug store with white friends. When he would not be served, the entire group left the store. At age 21, back from the war, he still "was not good enough." He became active in the civil rights movement and joined the march in Washington with 250,000 other people. He taught elementary school and moved into an integrated housing development.

2:01:00

He speaks of Rosa Parks, Montgomery, and Martin Luther King Jr.

2:06:00

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He started as a principal of an all black school and then was appointed to an all white school for integration purposes. He hung his pictures in his office. The school Superintendent asked him to remove them. He did but after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, he put the picture back up. Then, he was appointed to an all black high school. It was a most difficult, troubled school.

2:11:00

A survivor was talking to a very unruly class and Bass entered the room and told them to listen. He said he was there and it's true. They listened and left the room in silence. He had never told anyone, not even his mother or family prior to that day. He then went to the Philadelphia Holocaust Council and began to speak in public. This was about 1970.

2:16:00

People question him, "Leon, this is not a black problem." His answer: "It's a human problem. This is racism."