

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Bernard Weinstein. I'm the director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University.

Sharing the interview with me is Dr. Mark Lender, and we are privileged to welcome Dr. John T Farinella who was with the US Air Force at the time of the opening of Buchenwald concentration camp shortly thereafter. And he is here to give his own story and his testimony about what he saw at the time. Welcome, Dr. Farinella.

Thank you.

Mark, would you like to take the first question?

And welcome again. Thanks for being here, Dr. Farinella. If we could begin our discussion with you before the war so we can get some background as to who you are, where you came from, how it was you found yourself, ultimately in Europe at the time of the close of the war and the eventual liberation of the camps. Could we start with where you came from and perhaps how you found your way into the American military during the Second World War?

I was born and brought up in Hartford, Connecticut, and at the time the war broke out, I had already been drafted but was deferred for almost two years, and eventually, the draft board did call me, and that's how I got into the service to begin with. And I entered the Air Force after being drafted. I tried for pilot training and didn't make it, however, was sent to Fort Logan, Colorado for training in engineering and operations and then from there was one of 16 people out of a group of 1,000 who were picked to go to Europe as compared to those who went to the South Pacific.

Apparently, we were picked because of our European backgrounds and knowledge of European languages and being sent back into the European theater, we had some background for being there. And after basic training, we were shipped out to England, and then eventually attached to an Air Force training school. And this combat crew training school went on for most of the time that we were there until after D-day. And after D-day, when there was no longer that much of a need for that training school, they began to break it up, and--

You were attached to what outfit at the time, Mr. Farinella? It's the Eighth Air Force?

Eighth Air Force, and I was with the Eighth Air Force for the major portion of my time in Europe and then transferred from the Eighth to the Ninth Air Force, and as part of the Ninth Air Force, we had this outfit established that was intended to move on to the continent and aid with the disarmament of the continent. And we were known as the Tenth Air Disarmament Group.

Describe for us what an air disarmament group actually did.

We were never too clear as to what our mission was, but we did know that our job was to go out and get information and bring it back. And examples of some of the things that we did, for instance, at Nordhausen, we found this mine where the V2 rockets were put together and brought back the information, and actually pulled out one of the V2 rockets out of the mine, put it on a trailer and shipped it back. Where it went, we never knew, but it got picked up and got taken back.

Places like Schmiedebach, where they had a hole in the mountain and they were taking the free air through that hole in the mountain, bringing it down 400 feet on the ground, and breaking it down into the component parts of oxygen, nitrogen, and so forth, liquefying the oxygen, which became a part of the propulsion unit for the V2s. We picked up information on weather and all kinds of information, so we were more or less an information gathering outfit, bringing it back to our officers and having them disseminated to the proper channels. And basically, that was the mission of the--

Operated in small teams?

We operated in small groups. Four men in a Jeep, and usually we went out with rations. Enough ammunition so that if

we had to defend ourselves we could. We didn't have much of weaponry other than our rifles and whatever ammunition we took with us, and we were pretty much alone when we went out there were. Four men a Jeep. We went out to wherever we were sent and then came back with whatever information we found.

One mine we went into, a place called Egel. We brought back the information on the Messerschmitt 262, which was the first jet aircraft that ever flew in this world, and--

Were you looking-- had they sent you after that, or is this just something that you stumbled on?

Well, we went through that mine, knowing that there was something down there and that aircraft were being put together in that mine, and we had to go 2,200 feet underground to pick up all the plans and specifications and everything else. It was quite an operation on the ground. An amazing operation.

So they used to send you out on a hunch then, and you really had no specific idea of what it was you were really after?

Not really, no.

And is that a fair description as to how it was then, that one of your outfits came upon Buchenwald?

Apparently, our commanding officer had received information that Buchenwald had been taken, and it was a routine order. We were sent out-- a group of us-- to Buchenwald to bring back the information, and we had no idea what we were going to see or what it was all about.

As you had spent this time in the service, particularly in an information gathering or intelligence fashion, do you have any inkling at all about what the Germans had been up to as far as the atrocities that were later discovered?

Very little. The only inkling that I had had prior to this was a bit of information that I had translated for our squadron medical officer that had to do with the bathtub experiments, where they froze people to death and cook people to death. Both extreme to find out how much a human being can actually take in temperature extremes.

Did you-- were these documented reports that you received on these experiments, or--

Yes, it was a report. It was a medical report. Somebody has that somewhere today. I don't know where it is.

Written in German?

Written in German script.

But other than that, you were absolutely unprepared for what you were--

No, not for Buchenwald, no. Nobody could have imagined what we came to see and were told about.

Can you describe for us, then, and being as specific as you care to be, what unfolded as you came upon Buchenwald, what you saw, and what your perceptions of both you and your compatriots was, whereas--

Well, it was a beautiful sunshiny day towards the end of April, and we drove up to the gates of Buchenwald and parked our vehicle, got out, and a little redheaded boy in prison garb with the striped garb met us at the gate, and it was strange that he met us with this kind of statement. I want nothing from you.

Usually, when you were met by a refugee or a person who had been liberated was [GERMAN]. Food. [GERMAN]. And he said, that's not what I want. He said, when you go into this place today, he said, the one thing that I want you to do is never forget what you see and hear here.

And here was a little redheaded Jewish boy. He was redheaded. He could not be more than 13 or 14 years old, and yet,

he had a terrific message that meant nothing at that moment until we got into it and began to see what was there, and we did get into the hospital.

The hospital was nothing more than a wooden shack, and I imagine you can still see it now. The beds were nothing but a flat table like this, in which three people would be laid in there long way and just enough so that they would fit in there, and then there were tears of these bunks one on top of the other, and rows of them in this so-called hospital. And we had a guy who explained what happened in that hospital. How the people were lined up.

And those who were able were let go and those who were unable would probably be injected with a bubble of air, as I understood it, and eventually they get to the end of the line and of course dropped dead. The people who were actually in those cubicles lying there, we were told if somebody died, they went for days just lying there dead, because those who lived would take the food that was intended for them and they would use it for themselves.

So nobody reported anything or said anything.

Well, this is what we were told. There was nobody there. Of course the cubicles had been cleared out. There was nobody there when we got there, and our guide then took us to the crematoriums, and there we were taken into the little room and there was a room downstairs in which there were 40 jets in the ceiling and then meat hooks all around, and we were told that people went in there were told to take all their clothes off, that they were going to have a bath, and instead of water, of course, they were given the gas, and when they had died, they just hung them up on the hooks as I understood it all around in that little room.

And eventually they were simply brought upstairs into the crematorium, and they had these Coke ovens, where they had these steel cradles and the body was laid on steel cradle burned, and nothing but bones. The bones were still there when we went up there and looked at the crematoriums.

You had a guide, Dr. Farinella. Who was this guy? Was it an ally guide or--

No, it was one of the inmates, and he spoke very good English, took us around, and the young boy that had met us was still out there greeting the others coming in. So we had another guy who took us through and showed us through.

Was this an extemporaneous reaction on the part of the inmates or had this been something that was organized by someone from outside the camp?

I wouldn't know how to answer that. It seemed to me that was more or less a spontaneous kind of thing, where people were just telling about the horrors that they had just lived through and probably would never forget.

Can you remember any of your immediate reaction to what you heard or the reaction of those around you to what you heard?

My immediate reaction was one of almost disgust. You couldn't believe what you were hearing, and what you were smelling was not nice. It just was disgusting, and it changed a beautiful day to one of horror, is about the size of it, because you could not begin to imagine that anybody in this world would ever treat human beings in this manner.

You couldn't conceive of it. There was no way in which you could conceive of that.

While you were at the camp, was there any sign of German personnel or any guards had been swept up with the capture of the camp?

No, the Germans had been removed by the time we got there. There were no Germans there, and it was mostly the inmates taking us in and showing us around.

Were you aware of any organized relief efforts underway?

No, we had no way of knowing that. But one of the things that the American forces usually did when they moved into any of these camps was they cleaned up the inmates, deloused them, gave them food, clothing, try to take care of them medically if they could. Give them all the assistance they could, and apparently, a lot of that had already been done.

Were all of the inmates that you saw still dressed in those striped uniforms?

Yes.

Heads shaven?

We didn't really look too closely at them. We were so engrossed in what we were being told. We were looking at the buildings and the horror of it, not at the people themselves. It's strange to say that, but that's the reality of it.

This then was close to the end of the war. You spent, I take it, no more than a day there.

One day.

And then back to your--

Back to our routine.

--report on this day with the war winding down. What sort of a report that you make?

We simply reported that we had been there and that these were the things we had seen and that was the end of it. Our report was made, that was the end of it as far as we were concerned, and actually, we went right on to another job. It was like coming back, they give you a report, and you're off again. And the war ended for us in the city of Eisenach. In a Gasthaus in Eisenach.

And there again we had been sent there to pick up an ME 109 that we knew was there and an FW 190 that had to be taken apart and shipped back to Wright Field here in the United States.

To your knowledge, based on your report back to your commanding officer, did this go anywhere? Did it have anything to do with any subsequent follow up investigations of what was happening in the camps?

We never knew. We never knew. Our report was in, that was the end of it. We were never given any information as to what was done with the information that was given to them.

When you reported this back-- and I'm trying to now get some feel, not only for what your reactions were but as to what happened to this kind of information. Obviously, from the perspective of your team, It didn't seem to go anywhere. Did your commanding officer have any reaction to this? I mean, had he been briefed or did this seem to corroborate anything else that he'd heard or was he as surprised as you were?

I believe they had had some inkling of what we were going to find. They were not really that surprised, at least that was the feeling I had when we reported back, and of course it was a disgusting thing to hear about, and there was real anger among some of the people who heard the report. And yet, it was no different from our running into the DP camps where the displaced persons were and you had hundreds of people living in one room, men, women, and children all in one room, dirty, filthy, no medicine, no food. You had all of that ongoing at the time. This was just the worst thing that had ever been brought back.

Among those in your outfit, did this information or as it became clearer to you what had gone on and that it was perhaps part of a larger picture, this change your perceptions on the enemy that you were fighting?

To an extent, but none of us had any respect for our enemy at that time. They were not clean fighters of any kind. They had used all the dirty tactics you can imagine, and having seen the bombardment of cities in England, having been in

London when London was burning like somebody had just torched the whole city and seeing men, women, and children just racing for their lives every time the bombing started, you could not have any respect for that kind of an enemy.

Where the people that you saw in Buchenwald primarily Jews, or were they people who were also political prisoners?

No, no, Buchenwald was strictly Jewish. The people we met there were strictly Jewish, and Schmiedebach, it was a French concentration camp, and there we were told how, out of a group of 500 Frenchmen, there was only a handful, about a dozen left. So the atrocity was everywhere, and it extended to groups other than the Jewish groups.

Well, as your military career wound down, is it your last assignment was finding a German fighter and bringing it back to Wright Field. Was there anything else or was that essentially it? You were mustered out, I take it-- what-- 1945-46?

No, no. What happened after the Germans surrendered on May 9th, we were sent to redeployment depots. We were going to go back to the Far East, and there was a whole reassignment. We went from repple depple to repple depple and then back. I was assigned to a fighter group. We were supposed to head for Marseilles and just about the time we were supposed to head for Marseilles, of course, the atomic bomb was dropped.

And on August 15th, I found myself in London. V-J Day I walked into the wildest celebration you could have ever found. And of course, then it was a matter of getting everybody home, and everything went to pieces. Europe was just one nightmare of people just going hither, thither, and yon and everybody trying to get back home.

And it's pretty much your impression that, among those of you who were there to see the camps that the impression itself was, in many respects, overwhelmed by the whole process of demobilization and getting back into civilian life? What sort of an impression did it leave, I guess that's the question answer.

It left an impression you'll never forget. That was the immediate impression. However, life does go on, and this had happened, but once you got home, the war was over. It was pushed into the background, and you began the task of rebuilding your own life.

And over time, how was it your interest and what you had seen revived? It obviously did. Here we are.

My life was a very, very busy one from the time I left the service up until the present day, and there was no time for backtracking or reminiscing or looking back over your shoulder. Until one evening I was invited-- along with the commissioner of education-- into a home in Westfield, and the discussion centered around a number of things and finally it came around to the atrocities that had occurred during the war. And I sat there quietly wondering, am I a part of this or am I not a part of this, but since the whole thing involved an educational issue whether this should be brought into focus as an educational issue or not, I finally spoke up and indicated that I had some background in terms of what had transpired.

And from there, I was invited to serve on the Governor's Holocaust Committee, and I have served on that committee up to the present day.

As an educator, how do you feel about the teaching of the Holocaust in schools, and the governor's mandate to include Holocaust education as part of the curriculum?

I support it completely, and the superintendent of schools I did have our people write an elementary school curriculum, and most of the curriculum that have been written on the Holocaust have been at the secondary school level, but I had our people sit down and put together a curriculum for the elementary grades, and we finally decided that it could be taught most advantageously at grades six, seven, and eight. And we did develop a curriculum, which was approved by the Board of Education after a tremendous battle with some community members who tried to fight it off, and one board member even attempted to bring in the Ten Commandments.

If you're going to teach the Holocaust, then you've got to teach Ten Commandments. That's the kind of ploy that was used, but to the credit of the Clark Board of Education, they saw fit to approve that curriculum, and even now, as I

understand, it is in use in the public schools.

Why did you select the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades particularly? The teachers felt that the students would better understand what this was all about and that would be self-defeating you could teach the basic principles of man's love for his fellow man at the kindergarten level and do it indirectly. The direct teaching could come at grades six, seven, and eight where you could show the films that are available, teach the happenings that did occur at that time, and have youngsters who could put it in a proper perspective and gain from it.

That was the consensus of the staff. And I went along with it, because if your staff backs it in that way, then the chances are that they will cause it to succeed when they put it into operation in the classroom. And we were very successful. I had some very enthusiastic teachers who took over.

Has the introduction of the Holocaust into the curriculum generated community support as well as professional and staff support?

Yes.

--acceptance for it out there?

Also opposition.

Why? You've got both. You had support and you had opposition. You had opposition from people who were personally threatened, because they might have been of German descent.

They were really saying, it's not my fault that it happened. This may have happened, but you can't blame a whole race of people for this, but at the same time, they were trying to negate the whole thing, which was wrong in itself. Had they said, look, OK, it happened, it's unfortunate that it happened, but we're sorry it happened. Let's go on from there and know that it's a new generation of people and that they are different from the people who perpetrated these atrocities.

They didn't assume that stance. They assume the stance don't malign us, don't smear us. Don't dirty our names. We will defend them.

We'll fight at all costs kind of attitude. And some of these people were very, very astute individuals who were able to use strategies that were shrewd, calculated.

I was accused of being a humanist, almost as if you were talking about the Communist Manifesto kind of thing. But you're satisfied now that there is a great deal of support out there in the community?

I believe there is strong support. I also believe that there is an undercurrent of strong opposition, and you've got to be very much aware of that and not be lulled into a false security. It's there. It's a reality.

In your own speaking and public statements, officially and otherwise, have you tried to discount or to discredit this kind of notion of opposition?

I've tried not to make this a contest. In other words, in my addresses to various groups of people, the objective has been to state the facts as they are and to follow it up with the statement that it is our obligation to see to it that this does not happen again, and usually, that's been greeted with applause and strong support. My feeling has always been it takes two to make a fight, and if you give credence to someone who is trying to either build a lie or discredit something with an untruth, you're really building their case for them, and I've stayed out of that.

In recent years, there has been, I suppose it's too strong to call it a revisionist school thinking about the Holocaust, but there has been some argument, particularly in Europe, among some scholars as to the extent of what went on. The extreme case being a denial or a virtual denial that it occurred, others being that there were mitigating circumstances. Was there any of that you picked up in your arguments or the arguments that had to be fought at the school district level

to--

Oh, yes. there's a strong undercurrent of that. It runs the whole gamut from that never happened to, if it did happen, it's not as bad as you're trying to make it sound.

Well, you have been in contact with this issue on a personal basis while you were a serviceman, and certainly, and I would say an equally important way in your years as an educator. It has been an issue. I suppose it is not going to go away and your career is ample testimony to that. Do you have any final comments or observations you'd like to make about your entire experience on both levels with the Holocaust?

I believe that, in having been involved in the efforts to build a Holocaust curriculum for the state of New Jersey has been a very enriching and rewarding experience for me. The people with whom we worked, Rabbi Titus stands out very prominently. Luna Kaufman hearing first hand from the people who suffered and who still bore the scars of the terrible atrocities that were perpetrated.

It gave you a perspective on life that you could not have gained in any other way. In other words, through their suffering, they can enrich someone else's life and give you a better perspective on how to deal with your fellow human beings. And I have been very grateful for the opportunity to have served with these people.

One question that I would like to ask is as my concluding question is, do you think that your eyewitness experience has been the most significant factor in your own pursuit of Holocaust education? That if you had not seen what you had seen in 1945 that you might have gone a different path or perhaps not been particularly--

I think basically having experienced it as I did gave me an incentive that probably could have come from nothing else, because I saw it. I felt it. I smelled it. I knew it was there, and the place where it happened I was in there with the people who had suffered with it, and that's an unforgettable experience, and it stays with you.

There were times when I didn't even dare talk about it even. It was something you didn't talk about. It was too horrible to talk about, and people wouldn't believe you even if you talked about it.

Like the survivors themselves, you needed time to distance yourself from it.

That's right.

Thank you very, very much--

Thank you.

--Dr. Farinella. It was an honor to have you here.

My pleasure.

[MUSIC PLAYING]