

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good morning. My name is Bernard Weinstein, and I'm the Director of the Kean College Oral History Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies of Yale University. We are privileged to welcome today Mr. John B. Coulston, a liberator of Ohrdruf concentration camp, who is presently living in Convent Station, New Jersey, and has generously volunteered to give testimony about what he saw at the liberation of Ohrdruf camp and other places.

Mr. Coulston, I'd like to welcome you and tell you how privileged we are to have you here. I'd like you to begin by telling us a little bit about your life before the war, and where you came from and what your own aspirations were as a young man and go from there.

Thank you. Well, I was born in New York City, although we lived in Brooklyn. And we moved to Montclair in New Jersey. I was about two years old. I spent the rest of my life until the war there, accepting for prep school in Choate, up in Connecticut.

My aspirations, I worked as an office boy after school, and then I went to work for my family business. At about the 8th or 10th of September, 1939, England declared war in Poland. And not only I, but most of my friends, joined the National Guard of the state of New Jersey, because we felt that war would come. We joined. We trained with very, very old officers, with wooden guns, and that sort of thing.

But we thought we were doing the work that we were supposed to. We thought that somehow, we would have to fight the man who we all recognized was a menace. And we knew that because of the Fritz Kuhn people and the American Nazi party. I forget what they were called.

The German American Bund?

The German American Bund. And occasionally, we'd go up to Yorkville and see them, and that's one of the main reasons we understood what was going on. I did work as a salesman for our family company, which was in the paint industry, raw materials suppliers. And of course, I heard more about Hitler from the fathers of the people who were running the companies who were Polish and Russian Jews, and from one German, a German-Jew who had been a cavalryman, an officer, in one of the most prestigious of the Kaiser's cavalry units. And I suppose that is what made me understand somewhat, even back then, what was happening.

Also, in our industry, we had a wonderful, cooperative industrial committee. And one of the men who owned a paint factory in Vienna, he also was a paint technician and advisor over here in New York City. He was a member of this. Came back and wrote a book, and this was about 1938, 1939. I'll have to remember his name.

And he's still alive, by the way. And he printed the book and distributed it amongst all the people who were in the paint business back in those days, warning about Hitler. Of course, the press and the other people never heard about it. But that's my past until the moment I joined the Army, and enlisted me, of course.

Yeah. In those years, undoubtedly, you must have encountered the American Foresters and isolationists and people who spoke against the war. It sounds from everything you're saying that your perception, your early perception of what was going on, was not the typical response of a young man your age or in that time.

I agree there, but I only learned that after I became an office boy and met many other people from other sections of New York and New Jersey. Because most of my friends thought as I did. We were sort of a closed community, Montclair. We had our own social life. There were a number of types of people in our crowd.

But really, I suppose it was what we call patriotism. We had a different feeling about the whole situation than I learned about later, when I went to work and talked to other people who thought we were rather foolish. We weren't. But of course, my father in business, back in 1931, came home from meetings in Germany on the Rhine, a lovely, lovely place. This was just before Hitler came in. And he told mother and me about the wonderful bar in the hotel, and it was a rather aristocratic, or rather exclusive, place.

But suddenly, men in black leather jackets came in, and they started to sing boisterously and they drank their beer in a rather strange way. And he asked this business associate of Germany, he said, who are those people? He was surprised that they were allowed in the place.

And the business associate said, oh, they're Hitler's people. They're called Nazis. But don't worry about that. I mean, they're just bums. But Dad because in a place, in a hotel in a restaurant, in a bar like that, normally these people would have been ejected. But not even the bartender paid any attention to them. They were sort of afraid of them. And so that whole thing seemed to gel in my mind, and as we talked to our friends, our friends in their minds. So maybe I'm a little different.

Thank goodness. Tell us a little about your Army experiences, if you will.

Oh, thank you. Yes. I guess I was the proper age. I was 21. That's the enlistment age in those days. And I did join the horse cavalry, the Essex Troop. We had a wonderful time with horses.

This was when?

That's in 1939 in September, just after England declared war in Poland. We were called out for an extra two weeks, [INAUDIBLE]. And I learned to shoot and I learned to ride properly, the military way. Then we were finally called out for the one year of active duty, back in 1941, very early in January.

And as you might remember, there were only 220,000 Americans in uniform in those days, regular Army. There were 440,000 of us. So immediately, we had 660,000 troops, Army troops in the Army, in the United States, but of course, we were equipped with World War I equipment.

It was enjoyable back in those days, but as war came closer, we all realized the necessity of doing the proper job. And I was sent to OCS, Officer Candidate School, just after Pearl Harbor day in 1941, and then I graduated in April, March 1942. I was sent to the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. And it just happened that I arrived there with this unit that I was going to spend my entire career, three more years, exactly three years before we entered that horrible camp called Ohrdruf, that first camp.

And what was your tour of duty like prior to that time? Where were you?

We trained. We were under a regular Army colonel, magnificent man. He was hard. He was tough, but he trained us properly. He trained us in such a way that we probably had less casualties than the normal tank destroyer battalion that was engaged in the same type of combat.

We were in the units and were prepared for the Narvik invasion, which fortunately didn't come out. That was in Norway, as you remember. And that was to protect the lend-lease ships from going around to crushing the ice flows. We were fortunate in going to France at the end of August, rather than D-Day. We were delayed somewhat.

And then because of training, we were able to be a very effective unit from the very beginning. Yes, it was hard. Yes, we had numerous casualties. Our job, of course, was, as the name implies, to fight tanks. Our vehicles were very lightly armored, but very heavily armed. They weighed 20 tons, but they could go 70 miles an hour forward and 35 backwards.

We thought we were in the greatest tank battle the United States had and ever had since, which was in September and October. And around just before we got to Alsace-Lorraine, we were attached to the 4th Armored and many other units. We were caught in the Bulge, or rather we were sent to the Bulge. We were the first troops up there.

And we got there the 20th of December from the Third Army. We were surrounded, as others were. And then afterwards, we were in the breakthrough and fought our way up to the Rhine. We could anticipate each other's actions because we had been around so long, three years of training together. And that, again, is why we didn't have that many casualties, as compared to others, although we were severely hurt.

We crossed the Rhine towards the end of March, the fourth day of April, 1945. And I found this-- no, it was the first I'm sorry. The first day of April, 1945. And I found this in the army books. General Bradley evidently called up the armored forces and ordered them, as a task force, to go forward towards a place called Ohrdruf.

At that time, our lines were rather static. The Germans were fighting, at least in that area. But somehow, General Eisenhower, according to the books and the records, wanted Ohrdruf. It's near Gothen. We were attached to the 4th Armored and the 89th Infantry Division, which were in a task force. We, because of our equipment, along with the cavalry and the other tank destroyer peoples, were sort of a screening for us. That means that we were in front of the major elements.

So vanguard?

The vanguard. And if too many troops were fighting in front of us, we would go around them and let the heavy armor go forward. If there weren't too many, it was all right. Now also, since then, I learned that April 1st, 1945 was Easter Sunday and was also the fourth day of Passover. We got to Ohrdruf the seventh day of Passover. And we liberated either four or eight peoples, and the rest were dead or being marched away. And I understand from one of the survivors--

Four or eight people?

Yeah, four or eight people.

Out of how many, can you estimate?

Ohrdruf, according to history, was opened. Remember, the SS had that magnificent record keeping ability. And it was opened. It had been a school, and OSC school for SS officers. It had been opened as a concentration camp on the 6th of November, 1944, according to history. It was forcibly closed when our Sergeant Beeson, who's now dead, crashed his tank destroyer through the gates.

And they were killing-- the guards who had been left behind were killing the last of the survivors. They had just gotten out of the hospital. The other survivors had been marched away. And this man who we still know, the only one we found, a man named Leo Leifur, he was found by [? Bonnie Gurewitz ?], which the Center for Holocaust studies, at the Lodz ghetto festival, or whatever they call it, up in 1943.

Commemoration.

Yeah. He said that the rest of the people, the so-called able-bodied slaves, had been marched away, and he saw the march and then killed by those other guards. But they're either four or eight. I have pictures of four of them. Leo and the other three with him had escaped two days before and had been hiding out and saw us come in.

What was your perception as you saw them when you first came upon them?

I've been thinking of that and praying about it for 42 years. I had anger. My brain, and those of the rest of our people's brains, were disoriented. We had seen, of course, death. We had seen bodies burned. We had smelled the smell. Because after all, in tank destroyers and tanks, that's the way you die. But this was different. This was entirely different. You could see the skeletons, but so what.

I do know this, because a girl, a young girl in a high school, a second generation girl-- I had been talking to Al Adler, you might remember him, at Livingston High School. And most of the girls, most of the students, wrote letters thanking me, the regular type of thing. Thank you for coming and explaining about what has happened from your perspective.

But one little girl didn't. She wrote and said-- she was second generation. And she said when Mr. Coulston started to talk, I looked at his gray hair and his bald spot and I started to think of an old grandfather that I had never been privileged to know and that I was sitting at his feet. But then when he started to talk about his feelings as he went into

the camp, he didn't show the type of compassion that I understood. He showed no compassion.

Well, I know I had it, but I had to investigate, and I can't really tell anything, except being out of the letters that my father had saved for me. And fortunately, I had found out there, and I found out a little later from my daughter, my own daughter, who's now about 38, one of my letters had said-- because Dad didn't believe in the horrors of such things. He had heard about the Germans back in 1914, 1918, the atrocities. And so I had written, more or less, dear Dad, what I am about to tell you is a horrible thing, but please believe me because I actually saw it.

Excuse me, was this written immediately after?

Immediately afterwards, about three days afterwards. I said, I saw it. And then I said, you may not believe it, but it is true. I also later sent him a picture where I had 36 bodies in front of me, and then beyond them was a man he knew, the captain of our reconnaissance company, who actually had lived in our home.

And then I ended it by saying, I'm sorry to talk about such horrors. I know mother doesn't like it. But damn it, it really got me. And that's a rather abrupt or rather silly answer, but you see, I come from an Anglo-British background, where we weren't supposed to really show emotion. You remember when we played baseball or something or football and break a leg or something, we weren't supposed to cry.

Stiff upper lip.

That's my background. So how could you really know what you were feeling? Now my daughter, fortunately for me, added to that. And she was talking to the chap about these things, and I was there. And she said, something happened in the last four years to Dad ever since he went down to Washington to the meeting of the liberators, the State Department. He seems to have ended his war.

She said she remembered that friends of mine from the Army would come, and we discussed what we had seen. We couldn't discuss it with other people. They just didn't believe us. And I remember back then she didn't. There was an insane asylum in Cedar Grove near where we lived, and sometimes this friend of mine, a particular friend-- Ivan Curry, Texas, now dead. And I would pass the place and wonder if these people were really insane.

And I just wonder now why we thought that, accepting for the Holocaust that we had seen. And then she said not only Dad, but the rest of his friends, seemed to have now found release. And so that, I suppose, is my story, but it's taken 45 years, 40 years, to find out how I really felt.

You mentioned something to me earlier about receiving a tulip or a flower.

Oh.

Was that in Ohrdruf?

No, that was a beautiful experience. I don't remember which other camps we went into. Ohrdruf was taken the 4th. The end of the war was the 6th, I think it was, of May. And we ran into quite a few of the camps. But there was one that I did write about, and I can only talk through my letters.

We call the survivors slaves, by the way. And it just happened that the colonel and I and a few of our men went into a camp, and we were the very first of the friendly armed forces or soldiers that these people had ever seen. And a group of about three or four came in, or came out of the huts of the contonments. They walked towards us, apparently leaders.

And one old lady-- I called her an old lady in my letter, about 50 I said. Russian or Polish, I also said that. She came to me and she gave me a faded tulip, and she was crying, and yet she had hope and thanks in her eyes. I could never forget her. It sounds corny, but it isn't.

And I didn't know what that tulip really meant until years later when another person, Luna Kaufman, who had been in

concentration camps, said the SS commanders all had flowers. They had gardens. And after all, even a twig of grass was life to us back then. And so actually, this woman was giving me, as a representative of the American soldier, the gift of life in that faded tulip. And obviously, I keep telling that beautiful story because of that woman, whoever she was. It was a long time ago, and I hope that people understand it.

So in a sense, the affirmation for life came from somebody who had been through hell.

Death.

Through death.

Yeah.

Was there anything in your own reading or the briefings that you received or any information that you had gathered that prepared you? I know Ohrdruf was one of the very first camps that was opened, and I'm sure that you were among the first to see anything. Was there anything that prepared you for this, anything that could have?

No. I, of course, don't know what the others, that is, the senior commanders, know. I have an idea now, just because of Louis Reinstein's story, and he had been up there, that is, the Supreme Headquarters. But we hadn't the slightest idea what we were going to see.

I remember the odor. I think every single one of us talks about the odor. The odor of a battlefield and the odor of every place we went during those 10 months of war is identified by an odor, as different odors, but this one was different, I can't understand why. History says that you could smell it for two miles around the place. However, I remember that. I can still smell it.

The odor of--

The odor of that specific camp. And it's so different from the regular odors that I experienced for all those other months that it's the only odor I can identify now. I describe it to the children, or to the high school students, as a summer camp trunk that's opened after being stowed with old clothes for the entire time. Formaldehyde. You remember that in your biology classes. And just that word, putrid. And you combine it all, and it's a heaviness that we dream about, and that's what I remember.

But none of us understood what we were really seeing. And that's why I think when you look at the pictures of the liberators when they first get into these camps, they're staring. That's the first ones I'm talking about. And they're just staring, and they don't show emotion. And that must be the reason. It was such a horrible shock. And no, we knew nothing.

How did others in your battalion respond, some of the other men? Were there any visible reactions of emotion?

They were all about the same as me, that is, most of the people I knew. But we had a fair contingent of Jews, and they were different. They had the same emotions, and the emotions were acted out later in anger against the Germans, and the Wehrmacht even, and the SS of course, and acted out rather forcibly, to say the least.

But our Jewish comrades seemed to cry. They did cry. And at first-- remember, this is 1945, and we were really in 1939, because the other four years were in an army camp. So we didn't understand each other too much, but they cried as if these people were their own, and of course they were, but we didn't realize that at that time. But yes, I remember that.

And I remember because one of them, a man, a private first class-- he called himself Sol Tannenbaum from Hawthorne, I think it is. Fair Lawn. Fair Lawn, New Jersey. Just died. And I remember what he said about-- we had called him up from another company, which was on our right flank, because everybody knew that he understood Yiddish. And as you know, back in the '30s, we all knew what Yiddish was. They lived around here, but we didn't understand it. He did. So we called him over so that he could talk to these few, few people.

And he said that they looked at him as if they were animals that were going to be beaten again. Dead eyes. And finally, his Yiddish and his uniform-- they didn't know what the uniform was, but they knew it wasn't German-- sort of penetrated the dullness of their minds, and they started to cry and they realized they were liberated. So the memories are the total memories.

And fortunately, we were together so long, our battalion was, that we have our reunions, and those memories are coming out now. Because we're so close after three years of training, and then one year of war, that we are truly close to each other in a very intimate way that no one can really understand, unless they've been through it with the same people for so long.

And that's how we now know about our Jewish comrades and our other comrades. Most of our people were either regular Army, which means CCC camps, and then the families couldn't take them because of money so they joined the Army, or draftees. And most of the draftees came from the Garment District, by the way, of New York City, that first draft back in '41.

You already alluded, in some degree, to the present, to speaking and commemorating these events. In your own life, what has changed for you, or what has been the effect of what you witnessed in Ohrdruf and elsewhere?

I suppose a dedication from those early days my daughter talked about, 1950 and '52, '53. I suppose it was starting to gel, or even before then. I've been trying to trace back, look backwards into my own past. Unfortunately, I save things, save letters. And I see that I had written, or other people had written, that I talked about this as early as 1946 and '47 to various people, who commented on it 20 years later, 15 years later. I know that my friends thought of it. It was gelling.

And as it gelled, as we grew older and our children and the business of making money to support them and that sort of thing, that went on as usual with all of us. But also, whatever was gelling inside of us seems to have sprouted out. As far as I personally am concerned, it's resulted in what I call a brotherhood-- a wish for and a fight for and a I'll do anything I can to do it-- a feeling of brotherhood through strength, a brotherhood where we all can shake hands.

Not the silliness of saying love, or anything like that, but mutual respect, a mutual respect so that we can look each other in the eye, sit down, have coffee, talk, go into the most tragic or the happiest of subjects. And perhaps the more we can do that, the less likely it is that another Hitler or another dictator or tyrant who can change opinions on peoples and call them subhuman, as they call the Russians or the Polish, or non-humans, as they call the Jews-- it could never have happened, or would never happen again. It's a wish. It's a dream, but that's what happened, at least to me.

So it took some time before these ideas, these thoughts crystallized, but eventually.

Definitely. 40 years, 35.

Yeah.

And I don't know why I'm still searching to find out.

I think we all are.

Yeah.

As you look back on the history of those years and that whole period, do you think that we-- Americans, others. And I'm not talking about the people alone, I'm talking about our leaders-- that more could have been done, or that not enough was done, or that perhaps you feel otherwise? I don't know. I'd like to hear some of your thoughts about that.

That's interesting. And of course, Crystal Night, we're celebrating an interfaith-- we have an interfaith celebration or memorial next Sunday in Morristown at the Presbyterian Church. And the co-chairs, one is a rabbi from Toronto and the other is a Methodist minister, who was a liberator of Dachau. And the importance of interfaith brotherhood and Crystal

Night, as I examined it in my own mind, seems to direct me to your question and the answer.

If, after Crystal Night, when I don't think many Jews had been taken yet-- as a matter of fact, I'm certain of it-- most of the six million were still living in their homes under the conditions of life that they had always experienced, wherever that might have been.

Crystal Night occurred. Our nations, our Christian nations, of course they were very pious about. They talked in the newspapers about how dreadful it was, but there was no action. By action, I don't mean fighting at that time. I mean no ambassador was recalled from Germany and no one tried to boycott Germany at the time.

And I just wonder sometimes what would have happened if we and the British and the others had boycotted Germany, had withdrawn our ambassadors? Would that have stopped Hitler? As they say, France, back when the czar was taken, if France had mobilized and sent some troops in, Hitler had already planned to withdraw his, and another instance might not be war.

So therefore, I think that, yes, I think that the proper courage, the proper understanding-- I think that's where we lack it, because we're so fortunate being so far away-- lack of understanding of human tendencies, lack of understanding that because we are different, each one of us comes from a different culture background. That is, background going back 100 years or 50 years, or whenever our families took those brave men who came over here and their women to start a new life. So therefore, we can't understand these other countries as well. We don't understand their thinking. I hope I've answered it. I think I've gone around in a circle.

No, you've answered it. Yeah. Is there anything that you would like to say in conclusion?

No, except I certainly thank you for this opportunity. I think that all of us should make such statements. The more, the merrier because who knows what will happen in the future? And I think that the regular American who talks from his heart can have an effect in the future. I think your history and your approach to history by doing this is not only excellent, but is a godsend to the future. Thank you, sir.

Thank you. I'm privileged to have you say that.

[MUSIC CONTINUING]