

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Bernard Weinstein. I direct the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the video archives for Holocaust testimonies at Yale University. We're privileged to welcome Mr Henry Ricklis of Cranbury, New Jersey, who was an observer at the liberation of Dachau, and has generously volunteered to come in today to give us testimony about his experiences and observations. Welcome Mr Ricklis.

I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about your own background before the war, and what you did during the war.

Before the war, I was a student. And then I was drafted into the military. And going through basic training, I ended up at Fort Knox.

Are you a native of New Jersey by the way?

Yes. And I ended up at Fort Knox, where I took a basic training in the Armored Force. I went into the ASTP program, which was the army college program at that time. And when I deserved that, I went back to the Armored Force, and after a short while we went overseas.

And you were stationed where?

In Europe or in this Country?

Yeah.

Well, we landed in Lahav on a bitter cold morning. We were glad to get there and get out of the trucks. Have never been so cold in my life before or since. It was almost a blessing to land finally, in the middle of the winter there. Then we started with a trek Eastward.

Eastward to--

We went through Holland, through Belgium, and eventually into Germany itself.

And you were at Dachau in 1945. All right. Would you like to tell us about your experiences or observations there?

Well, I had heard about the camps. No one knew to what extent they existed. No one believed really, I mean, they were there people who had lived through it, who had survived through it. Those who managed to escape somehow told about it. Those who had gotten out earlier perhaps, but I had wanted to see for myself. I had a personal interestness.

I knew that I had a lot of relatives that were from Lithuania. I know that we hadn't heard from them. My father hadn't heard from brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. And we had a lot of family there, a sizable family. I found out many years afterward on a trip to Israel that none of them had survived, they were all-- they were all done away with. I don't know where, and then how, and what manner.

At the time you came upon the camp, had you known anything or heard anything or read anything about what was going on, or anything that could have prepared you for what would we would see.

No, not really. Not really. I mean, we had heard of the death camps or the concentration camps. They were the Germans, of course, had many different types of camp. Some were labor camps, some were annihilation camps, some they had slave labor there. I guess they had different categories of camps. I don't know whether they all had the crematoria, but those that did were prepared to do away with people on a mass production basis.

Can you give us a sense of what your first impressions were?

Well, my first impression at the time that we had gotten there the camp had been liberated by our division by other troops, and the Germans, the Nazis, and all of their underlings, I guess were frightened off those that hadn't been captured. When we got there and there were still trains there, they dreaded death trains that carried people into the camps that would carry in their live cargo, and left empty to get more cargo.

And the first thing that was there, were a couple of carloads of people that were there apparently, whether they had suffocated or died or just been left to rot in these boxcars that was-- they were on a railroad siding to go into the camp. That was the first thing.

And then.

Then as you got into the camp, you saw-- it's hard to describe them as human beings. I mean, they were faceless, they would look at you and they didn't-- I don't think they realized what was happening. They were emaciated, they were bags of bones really in their striped uniforms. And--

Were you able to approach any or speak to any people?

To a few of the people they would come up toward you, stagger up toward you, and these people would talk in Polish or Yiddish, or whatever was their native tongue. And I spoke Yiddish. So of course, I understood some of what was said to me. Some of these people were not coherent really. I mean, I think they were not just abused. I think they were dazed and it's hard to describe these people really. I mean, they were, they were hardly human beings at that stage.

These were the ones who were mobile? Able to able to get around?

They were people that were laying in bunks, who were not mobile. I'm sure many of them died. I was not in there that long, just enough to get a glimpse. And some of the soldiers that I had spoken to had gotten into the camp. Now many of these servicemen were so-called veterans, they had seen sights and sounds and been through a great deal. And many of these soldiers when they saw this got in there and reached. I mean it was beyond belief.

I spoke to a number of these people, and these were people of various faiths. And whatever their background they just couldn't comprehend the sights that they saw.

In other words, nothing that they had seen in war itself had prepared them for this kind of--

No.

-- consequence.

I don't think there is any preparation for this type of visual sight. I mean, fellows had been killed whether they were in accidents or bombardments or shellings, but it wasn't quite the same. Nothing that any of these fellows had seen, and on the scale that this was where this was to be a mass extermination of an innocent people. People who have done nothing other than being born incorrectly.

Were these primarily men you saw or women, or children?

I saw no children. I don't recall seeing any children. Really honestly thinking back, I didn't see too many women. That was primarily men that I saw. Very gaunt looking men.

Did any of them ask specific things or specific questions of you? Or did they--

Who are you? What's happening? Is the war over? Are we free? Some were looking for food. Some of the servicemen with all good intentions would start feeding some of these emaciated people. And I think this in itself killed some of these people. I mean, their bodies couldn't take that type of nourishment, all at once. These were people who had been starved without food. Any sort of real food, for God knows how long, and suddenly they were giving them D Rations,

chocolate bars, cans of rations. I don't think their systems could take this. I guess in itself may have killed a number of people.

I've heard that many developed typhus as a result of being fed certain kinds of foods that were too rich for their bodies to absorb.

No.

Yeah. Yeah, how long did you--

I can't give you a broad overview. I mean, I can only give--

What you saw.

A limited viewpoint from what I saw as an observer for a short time. I can only imagine what these people who lived through it. Or I tried to imagine at the time how they could have survived for all the years that some of them were subjected to it.

How did the overall impression of what you saw in the few minutes or so that you spent there, how did that affect you personally beyond those moments?

Well, one of the things that I thought of was Germany at one time was considered a highly cultured, very much advanced in the sciences. After all, they've turned out a lot of philosophers and scientists and great minds. I was a young kid at the time, and I think I matured a great deal in a few minutes. I mean, what went through my mind a few times was how people supposedly, as civilized people, could subject other people, innocent people. Have they been guilty they wouldn't have been subjected to this type of thing, have they been guilty of anything. Here were innocent people who were subjected to this type of thing, and it was inconceivable to me of the man's inhumanity to man.

Were you able to speak to anyone of your peers or others about these things immediately after seeing them? Or did it take a while before this could gestate or before it could--

Yes. I think it took me a couple of days. I mean, I think I was in a state of shock for a short period of time just having chanced on this because it was-- I don't think the mind could conceive of this type of thing. That's why it was understandable that people back in the States, even people who had relatives there could not conceive of what was going on. It just-- I don't think the mind could imagine this.

And how did you pursue what you had discovered or what you had learned subsequently? And what way did you use this information or knowledge that you had?

Since that time for a number of years now, I have been involved with Holocaust observances. I have tried to perpetuate this both to people, through people who have lived through it, many who were reluctant to talk about it, and to younger people who had no knowledge of this. Unfortunately, I don't think enough of this has been disseminated through education to the young people.

Now they apparently seem to be doing this. But at the time I got involved with Holocaust observances it wasn't really that prevalent situation. And I've tried to awaken people to this in my own limited way where I live presently, I've been involved with Holocaust observances where we have many people who are survivors who take part in an annual observance of this as a remembrance of this. And in a small way I guess it keeps it alive what happened, so was people do not forget.

When you speak of reluctance or withdrawing from the reality of it, why do you think people have responded that way at least in the past?

You're referring to survivors?

Survivors and others.

You know why I guess you can understand that, it was the type of a nightmare that I guess many of these people who lived through it and finally survived. However, they survived, and you don't know how many survived. It was a matter of surviving any way that you could. I imagine I have since spoken to many of these people. And to survive for another day was their only goal in life at that time.

And I imagine once they came through this, they just wanted to put it out of their mind. was a nightmare that maybe they didn't believe it even existed, it was all a nightmare and just that.

Finally, I think many of these people have realized that after they've gone there is no one to talk about this. And it's only the people who saw and the people who survived, who are still alive today who can talk about it. It's the only way it has any sort of meaningful appreciation. If you can call it that.

Initially did you find that perhaps even to this day, do you find that people who were not directly involved or are not directly eyewitnesses resist or reject what you might want to tell them about these things that you saw?

Very difficult thing to say. I mean, people are individuals. People who did not survive or who didn't have any interest in this in one way or another, who had no relatives perhaps regardless of their ethnic background. Well, it's not my problem, it's someone else's. I mean, I hate to think of it that way, but perhaps I've encountered people as you say who-- well it's a long time ago and it's best forgotten about.

Did you find evidence or concrete information about your own relatives, because you said that you had many relatives?

Yes. I found that afterward, many years afterward when I had gotten to the Yad Vashem in Israel. There were names of people by towns, and a number of my relatives, aunts and uncles and first cousins, who were listed there. And they have the archives at the Yad Vashem for those that are familiar with it, and they were listed there. At that point, I found the complete listing or as complete a listing as they had gotten together.

I imagine knowing even though it was painful, it must have been a great source of relief for you.

Well, if you can call it relief, at least. At that point, my father and his sister were no longer alive, so there wasn't even anyone to tell. And relief, if you can call it that it's--

Let's call it--

At least I was aware of what had happened. I don't think my father or his sister, my aunt had any idea of what had happened. I know they didn't because they had lost contact with their brothers and sisters prior to the war. There was no way of maintaining contact.

What has been your personal involvement in recent years with Holocaust commemoration? With Holocaust education? With Holocaust memory?

Well, I had been instrumental in putting this into the high school system, the township where I live. I've spoken to groups, I've spoken to the school group, I've spoken at Holocaust observances. I've tried as I said previously, I've tried to perpetuate some sort of a remembrance annually. And--

Has this been a single handed effort or have you have you had cooperation from community?

No. I have enlisted the aid of many people. People who felt that there were survivors in the communities I should say where I live, there are three communities. There are a number of people who are survivors at one point they were reluctant to come out. And then I guess for their own sanity, for their own well-being, I guess they felt it was time to speak about it.

There are a number of people who have all sorts of tales to tell and how they survived, and whether they tell it the way they survived or whether they've changed it somewhat, the point is that they did survive somehow through the grace of God. And they were alive today to tell the story. And many of them are willing to do just that

How do you feel about the present effort to incorporate Holocaust education into the schools and into curricula of high schools, colleges, and so on? -- What

I feel that it's a very important part of-- it happened in our lifetime. The lifetime of people of my age group, and I feel that somehow if these people, the survivors, the people who so don't tell about this. It may cease to exist. It's been treated by many as a fiction and as a hoax. And those who saw it or who lived through it, in one way or another, know that it's otherwise. It was not a hoax. Whatever has been said and documented is true, every last word of it.

I noticed that you brought in some notes, some material, was there anything specific? Any specific message or statements that you wanted to make other than those I've tried to cover briefly in these questions? That--

Not really, I mean, it was-- the only thing is that I remember having traveled through France and through Belgium through Holland, they had all been touched by war, as we got into Germany, into the Western part of Germany. Some of the towns and villages had been torn apart. Railroad stations torn apart and buildings. And as we got into Bavaria, it was in the spring and everything was green and growing. And it was beautiful. I mean, I can still picture this even to this minute it was beautiful rolling hills and fields.

And then as we got near Dachau, that's when the whole scene changed. Again, as I said before it was-- there's no way of describing really what I felt at the time. Revulsion, sick in the stomach, disbelief, I don't know how to describe it much better than that, but in my young naive mind, and I was 20-year-old kid then, I just couldn't conceive of people treating other people, treating animals that way. Let alone other human beings. Innocent human beings whose only guilt was being born Jewish.

I think your dedication and your effort is away by which we can hopefully if not alleviate hatred and prejudice in the future, at least understand that it's there and understand what happened and maybe some people will take steps to remediate.

It's not an original. It's not an original phrase, but those who forget history are doomed to relive it. So I think could behooves us not to forget what happened 40 years ago.

Thank you for giving us your testimony.

It's been my pleasure.

Happy to have you.

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