

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH: MR. HENRY BIRNBREY
CAMP:
INTERVIEWER: Lynne Keating

Q: Mr. Birnbrey, how did you first hear about the concentration camps?

A: Well, I was aware that they existed. I was born in Germany myself, and my father was arrested while I was still in Germany in 1937.

Q: Where in Germany did you live?

A: We lived in Dortmund, and friends of ours had already been to concentration camps and my father was arrested and because a judge was a friend of his, let him out and suggested that he hide for six weeks because there was a minimum of people who went to concentration camps, so that the people who had falsely accused him would think that he was in a concentration camp. So I knew of their existence, and then of course there were articles in American magazines and so nobody took them serious, but all of us knew they existed. Then during World War II, we were certainly aware of it ...before the incidents that I want to relate to later. Some small camps had already been liberated. Not these famous camps, but they were small concentration camps which were used for forced labor near industrial plants. I had always known they existed.

Q: When did you come to the U.S.?

A: I came to the U.S. in 1938 by myself. My parents sent me out because they anticipated what was coming.

Q: When you were.... during the war, what was your first knowledge that there were camps?

A: Well, as I say, I think I was aware that they existed before I was in the Army, and while it was played down in certain quarters, I don't think it was a secret.

Q: So you were very aware when you were over there...

A: Oh yes.

Q: What was your experience during the war _____....?

A: You mean vis a vis this... the Holocaust in particular?

Q: Yes.

A: We ... I was a forward scout, usually going ahead of the Infantry Division to see whether there was any opposition or sometimes to simply select a site where we would bivouac or where we would set up our cannons, our guns, or simply just to survey the situation and report back what we saw. After the major battles were over, and we were moving very fast, sometimes one or two days ahead of the Army, just going around in a Jeep trying to see what was going on, and our objective was to take Berlin. The last resistance we had encountered was in Brunswick (or Braunschweig?) in Germany and that meant the going was very easy, and after the Potsdam Agreement was signed, of course, we were not to take Berlin and we only went as far as Markleborg (?). On the way between Brunswick (or Braunschweig) to Markleborg, we encountered ditches along the highway full of concentration camp victims who had been shot, they were apparently being marched towards the west, and when the German Army or the German captors saw that they could not lead them west, rather than permitting them to attain freedom or be liberated, they were all shot in the head or shot by machine guns, because the ditches were just lined up with dead concentration camp victims for miles and miles and miles.

Q: You came upon these bodies in these ditches?.... Was there any attempt for burial or for..

A: Not by us, because we were just - usually we were just from three to five of us - doing scouting. We would radio back what we saw and as a matter of fact, there was very little that we could do. We didn't have anything, and the people behind us of course _____ burying identification. We had nothing to do with it, but the interesting part was as we would capture a German military personnel, and interrogate them, although some of them had to be involved with these masses of people, we could never take a German prisoner who wouldn't immediately tell us that he was not fighting on the western front, which is the front we were on, but that they were

fighting on the Eastern Front and were escaping from the Russians. We never found anyone who identified as having anything to do with these people we found in the ditches.

Q: Did you ever approach a concentration camp - per se - yourself?

A: Not any of the large ones until later; after they had been liberated, I was an interpreter at Buchenwald, but the main thing that I want to relate is as we were going towards Marklborg, we noticed a tremendous unpleasant odor, it was just in the air and it was just terrible... something unbelievable, words just can't describe. We finally came upon a train, a freight train on a siding in the middle of nowhere, there were probably 20 or 30 cars, can't tell how many at this point in time, and we heard voices inside. And these freight trains had been abandoned on the siding, and as we opened them, they were full of live, half-live and dead and half-dead youth. It is always difficult to describe the scene because you can't find words to describe this kind of situation. This is where people had been put into such a sub-human situation under such sub-human conditions that it was almost difficult to identify with them as fellow human beings. I mean there were... I mean their own waste was in the freight cars, the people.... ^{don't think} I remember seeing one of them that appeared to be sane at the moment of the liberation.

Q: What was your personal feelings?

A: I said, a== we were too stunned to know what to do, it was such a - you know, sympathy and all that when you have recall there are a million things you wish you had done and a million things which you could have done and at that time, it was almost the kind of thing - it was so horrible, it was so unsightly, so unpleasant, that you almost wished it would just go away. Or that somebody else would do whatever had to be done.

It was just such a terrible _____ encounter, totally unexpected for us. Totally unprepared for it. The only food we carried... I mean, here were people begging for food, and the only food we carried was emergency rations for ourselves and we didn't have anything, we had field rations, you know. We didn't have a kitchen or anything. And later, as we recalled, we could think of a million things that you wish you could have done ... but didn't. The only thing we really did was to open the freight cars and radio back to tell people what we had seen. After awhile we were told, you know,

they were dirty, filthy, ugly, this is something almost that people have to see to understand.

Q: Were there any other Jewish people with you?

A: No, I was the only Jewish person. You know, it's hard to say, but you almost didn't feel like you could identify with them, and say these are my people, because they had been so degraded by the process that they just, you know, you had to do a lot of soul-searching.... I guess it's very ^{not similar but} similar, but something like some comparison, you know, some people _____ would rather not have to deal with handicapped person, forgetting the angle that you should do it.... that you should pit, not pity, but it's the human thing to do. But you would rather deal with a healthy person than a person that is very unsightly and very dirty. It's like an untouchable, and we always found ourselves become.... ourselves inhuman because of what we saw. The only.... uh, we helped some of them off the train, some of them fell off the train, jumped off, sat by the side, then they walked around like they just didn't know where they were.

Q: Do you remember what date this was?

A: I'll give you an approximate date...it would have been probably in March or April of 1945.

Q: Do you know what happened at that time?

A: Yes, I did follow up, and got information_____, I did not witness it, but I understand the U.S. Medical Team evacuated the nearest German town, made every German get out and used this entire village or town as a hospital, and put these people in the hospital, and quarantined them, because they did not know what diseases these people might be carrying, etc. And as far as I know, ^{for} some years the Army Medical Team took over, what happened from there I do not know/ I have never met anyone who could have been on _____, no pictures, no anything.

Q: What did the people on the train do when they saw the doors first opened up?

A: Well, as I say, they didn't act like normal human beings, it was almost an animal-stages, I mean if you had had a _____ like you had a carful of dogs and they had gotten out, it would not have been much different. They were just not human beings at that point, in time. They were weak. No human beings. I mean they couldn't communicate, the only word that came out of a lot of them was the Jewish word for Jew, which I would say was "Yid." And that's about the only word I really remember. They would point to the Jewish Star that was sewn on their concentration camp uniforms.... "a Yid."

Q: Were they actually in uniforms in the concentration camp?

A: Oh yes, absolutely.

: Did any of them have numbers...?

A: Oh, I didn't look at the numbers... I am sure they did. You know the shirts and the pants, and couldn't see the arms. We just didn't look for that sort of stuff, but it was just a very very tough situation. The older... the older this experience might be ; ...this state of shock....and this is really the story that I wanted to relate. I don't know how often this happened, but this train had actually just been abandoned, and there was no population, no houses that I recall where the train was sitting, and the only thing that brought us to it was the odor.

Q: Was there any evidence of violence among the people that were in? At the time they got out?

A: No, they just wanted,.... they just the sidings like they didn't know what was happening. And of course it was too many people for the few of us to even do anything for these folks. I mean they had 20 or 30 cars, packed with people, and we finally just had to steal away.

Q: How did your Infantry cope among themselves? Did you find any qualms after you left?
 _____?

A: Well, in my mind, was my conscience....in front of my whole life, because I recalled _____ very often, but again, we had a job to do and I hate to sound like the Germans, they had a job to do, but we had a job to do too - with orders - and our job was to ~~keep~~[?] enemies as quickly as possible, and we were told that other people would

look after these people, and we had our job to do which was ...

Q: So your Infantry did leave before the other....

A: Well, things were moving so fast; at that time, we were moving faster than we could keep up with it, and we finally were brought to halt in Maltoboro (?) because that was the line that was agreed upon.

Q: Did you tell anyone about these experiences afterwards - besides....?

A: Yes, I have spoken at a lot of high schools, given -- speaking on the Holocaust and I have always made a part of the speech, part of the talk, - that's about it.

Q: You have children?

A: Yes.

Q: Have you talked about your experiences with them?....And its importance to you?
Do you talk about the Holocaust in general?

A: For years I could not get myself to talk about it at all, and I really only began speaking about it when I was asked to speak in a high school, and then I felt how important it was to disseminate because people just plain had no concept and did not understand, of course, most of it. I was always asked to speak my mind as a teenager in Germany, and then I would go into these war experiences.

Q: Was it difficult for you having lived in Germany before and coming over during the War and then re-living all those things? Did you have mixed...?

A: You know, I ...

Q: Conflicting feelings, you know?

A: When I went into the Army I was 19 years old and a lot of the feelings that you think you should have had, but as you think about as you get older - you just plain didn't have. In those days we were all anxious to fight with tremendous patriotism in the U.S. and we were... I just never looked at the whole situation in the way I do now.

Q: Did you have - hostile feelings toward Germany?

A: Yes, certainly.

Q: To the people, or ?

A: Both. Certainly. There is no question about it, I have - and had - hostile feelings and it got more hostile when I was asked to interrogate prisoners, because we could never try a single German soldier who knew what was going on ^{who} like the Nazis who fought on one Western front....

Q: Do you look upon the German people as different from Nazis?

A: You mean today?

Q: This is a very personal thing, and when I say this, I don't expect others to feel the way I do. I would criticize others for feeling different. I feel that the majority of the German generation during the period of the Holocaust was involved and was guilty ... they did very little to - in terms of fighting the regime, and as long as things were going well, they were very happy and satisfied and couldn't care less aboutto make a statement a statement of the population suddenly disappearing. For that reason, I do feel hostility towards Germans who are - who ~~xxx~~ approximate my age or older and I certainly can't blame the young ones for what was going on, and for that reason I still boycott German products. I mean if something costs 10 cents and it is made in Germany, I just won't buy it. Now I did go back, because my parents were buried there; my father got killed in the Crystallnacht (the Crystal night) massacre, and my mother died shortly thereafter, but because they were buried in a known place, I felt an obligation to put a tombstone there. Last year the city invited me back and paid my expenses to go back and I was very frank and outspoken about how I felt about the whole situation, because they presented me with a book of - giving the history and giving the history of World War II. It's a beautiful book, the printing is magnificent, photographs are magnificent, but in the entire book of about 120 pages, there is only 1/2 line which mentions the existence of the Jews in the city. Where the synagogue was is now an Opera House and there is no marker marking that the synagogue stood there and was burned. The Jewish cemetery is very beautiful and maintained, but only in the middle of the cemetery is a monument to the Communist victims of the Nazi era, which had nothing to do with the Jewish cemetery.

A: And the biggest memorial is maintained in the city on an annual basis was the tremendous amount of publicity, funds and whatnot, is a memorial to approximately 15 or 20 people, whom the Nazis shot on the last days of the War....the last day before the city was occupied, none of whom were Jews and they somehow seem to try to satisfy the whole experience with that. As I told the Mayor of the city that it's terrible that these 15 or 20 innocent people got killed, I find it very difficult that you ~~may~~ ~~know~~ big make a monument, these were all unknown people; they were not local people, they just happened to be in the city as prisoners of war or whatever. How you can make this big a deal out of that and totally ignore a population that were.... a Jewish population that was eliminated, which more people from that city which numbered a thousand times as many, and there is nothing said. And they still apparently find it very difficult to cope with the problem. They find it very difficult ~~to~~ ~~accept~~ ^{to} accept what had happened.

Q: You mentioned that you were an interpreter at Buchenwald. Is that something that you are willing to share...

A: Well, it was strictly...

Q: WhereWere you there at all before the liberation.... I mean after the liberation? I mean immediately? Shortly after or ?

A: Shortly after, but then we were just sightseers, there were no more people left - give one or two you know. We were... it was almost like going on a tour... they would tell us ... this was a crematorium and this was and these people, etc.

Q: Did you actually see a crematorium and everything?

A: Yes.

Q: What else did you see?

A: Well, we saw the barracks where the people were kept in, and we...

Q: Did you see any_____?

A: I am trying to recall ... It was basically just walking through, showing us the barracks and I would _____ somebody was telling us what it was, and I would interpret it from German to English, and I did the same thing on some other.

A: I took several Germans through a place where slave labor...it was maintaining an airplane factory in salt mines, way down in the caverns of salt mines, and _____ also all the French gold, gold that belonged to the French government was found down there, and I know who was in charge of seeing that the French people got their gold back.

Q: May I ask _____ what exactly _____ so far?

A: _____

Q: Well, did you, or your Infantry or part of the Infantry, did you ever _____?

A: There was a very small one, which I never heard anything about. There was a place near Lehesten in Gervingia (?) where the Germans were experimenting with _____ bombs and rocket bombs and I don't know what you call it, but it was a slave labor camp, and they probably had 100 or 200 people performing slave labor for the experiments that were taking place, but that was the only other one. The head of the place, who we took prisoner two weeks later, was in Huntsville, Ala. in the Redstone Arsenal, as an expert, his name was Dr. Lieel and we took him prisoner. I had hoped that since he was in charge of slave labor, that something would happen to him, but they needed his knowledge so much that before I got home, he was in Huntsville, Ala.

Q: Did you feel any compulsion to, you know, make known what he had...uh, you know...?

A: Oh, I think it was uh knowledge, but I guess we needed his know-how too bad, that we too were willing to forgive and forget.

Q: What was done at this camp?

A: I don't know if these people were killed or mistreated or what, except it was slave labor.

Q: Do you consider yourself ... did you consider yourself a religion person at this time?

A: Yes.

Q: During all these experiences, did you question the existence of God....

A: You know these people always ask me these things. But, you just don't get all these profound thoughts at that particular stage in life. It was -- besides --

A now you can moralize and talk in high planes, but soldiers who were also interested in finding a bottle of beer for the night, or who were hoping to get a pass, there are personal thoughts - that every soldier has - just as important as all these things.

Q: Did your own personal identity _____ did that change any from day to day? _____ or something? Or sense of responsibility?

A: Oh yes, I have been overactive in communal, Jewish communal work, and I feel it as an obligation, and a lot of people don't understand, but it's been equal plane with my business for about thirty years or more -- because of that. Because I feel that had we been more active and more knowledgeable and cared more for one another, then maybe more people could have been saved.

Q: Do you any _____ forgiveness, you know? Forgiveness in your heart for the Nazis?

A: No, not really. I just _____. You can't forgive somebody unless they want to be forgiven, and by and large a great majority have not owned up to the fact that they participated. They say, I am sorry I did it, but the general thing is that I didn't know what was going on.

Q: Did any of these experiences change you politically? Other than you are active with uh....law and order, you know, just as you mentioned as far as Jewish questions? In a broader sense to include things for you know helping _____ such as Cambodians?

A: Yes, because I speak very often I think the whole problem with the world is that the Holocaust can happen again, is because nobody gives a damn when somebody else has these things happen to them. You know when there is no Christian response to the Lebanese-Christian for example, I don't ever expect the Christian community to be concerned with a mere Holocaust if they really don't care about their own community. I was ~~xxxx~~ in Tel Aviv _____ and I was looking out my hotel window and I saw hundreds of students parading mourning the loss of Bangladesh; these are people who couldn't care less theoretically because they ~~never~~ ^{probably} heard of Bangladesh and certainly no direct communication, but they felt that