

NAME: JOHN GLUSTROM
INTERVIEWER: ED SHEEHEE
CAMP: BUCHENWALD
DATE: NOVEMBER 6, 1978

A: My address is 1860 Wellbourne Drive N. E., Atlanta, Ga. 30324. I've been there for thirty years. I was born December 31, 1916. I witnessed the concentration camp liberation about 3 to 4 hours after the Germans had fled away. I was with the American Army Engineers. My prospective profession at the beginning of the war was a businessman. My present occupation is a businessman. I was with the 333rd Engineers at the time we liberated, we helped to liberate, the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. I was a warrant officer.

Q: How did you first hear about these camps?

A: I had first heard about the camps through reading about them in the newspapers. I never did really believe that such a thing existed. I thought it was propaganda put out like the propaganda about Germans cutting off women's breasts in Belgium in World War I and killing children by stabbing them with bayonets in World War I, which later turned out to be propaganda, so I felt that this also must be propaganda because it was too gruesome to contemplate human beings doing officially as an action of a state.

Q: Did you have any idea of what you would see when you got to a place like this?

A: I had no idea in the world.

Q: What was the mood of your group when you were approaching this camp?

A: I was in a jeep with one other American soldier so we were not actually liberating the camp, but we were coming on it to see it after the Germans had fled away. At that time, they were in serious route conditions and they were fleeing from us and trying to turn themselves over to us as fast as they could to keep the Russians from getting them.

Q: Do you remember the date?

A: No.

Q: And did you have any personal feelings about this? About these camps other than what you've told me?

A: I'll tell you my feelings shortly about them. I have a statement now I can read about them if you like.

Q: Let's go on and then we'll get that. Now, give your description of the camp as you remember it. When you first got there, what was your first impression? What did you see? The sights and sounds, etc.?

A: My first impression of it was the odor. The stench of it was all over the place, and there were a bunch of very bewildered, lost individuals who came to meet us pathetically at the door in their unkempt uniforms to see what we were doing and what was going to be done about them. They were staying at the camp even though their guards and staff had fled because they didn't know where to go or what to do. They had heard news that the Americans had taken over that area, and they were waiting for somebody to turn their lives back straight again. They were just lost souls at that time.

Q: What did they do when they saw you?

A: They came up and they tried to embrace me, and they talked to me eagerly about what had happened to them and how it had happened.

Q: Did they have any orders about what they were supposed to do or anything?

I mean, they didn't know what was going on, did they? They were just kind of lost, wandering around.

A: They were just wandering there in the confines of this awful place.

Q: Were they processed in any way? Was there any ordered structure to what was being done or was just everyone standing around gawking and looking?

A: Everybody was standing around when we got there. In fact, we were helping to feed them.

Q: What did your fellow soldiers and officers say and do at this time when you were there? How did they treat these prisoners?

A: They treated them very, very well.

Q: What did they say to them?

A: They had the same deep feelings, as well as I could tell, that I had about the horrible atrocities that were committed by man against man.

Q: What was your feeling?

A: My feeling was that this was the most shattering experience of my life, and it has been the most shattering experience of my life since.

Q: Did the condition of these people make you consider them as less than human beings or how did you feel about them?

A: I felt the captors were less than human beings. I thought that these people were helpless victims of a system that had been impossible for them to cope with. They were in the position of someone who was forcibly kidnapped by a machine gun armed band on the street and taken somewhere and tortured and executed. They had no chance to defend themselves. The system was so clever, and I felt the country was being run by a madman, who had a lot of willing accomplices and he was carrying out this program of his. A madman dealing with sane people who were helping him carry out his mad program.

Q: Were any of the guards around or any Germans around when you got there?

A: All the guards had fled.

Q: Were there any killed? Could you see any dead ones?

A: No, nobody was killed. There were some inmates of the camp who were almost dead and the ovens were still burning. There was still human flesh and bones burning in the ovens when I came on them. They had about six or eight ovens in a row -- all of them smoldering and burning and crackling.

Q: But you saw no Germans at this time?

A: No, except there were probably some Germans who were inmates in the camp, but the people in it for the most part were people from Poland, Romania, and Hungary, who had been shipped there for extermination.

Q: Did you see any violence by the inmates?

A: None at all. They were very peaceful and pleasant.

Q: How would you answer the question: What kind of people would do this?

A: I felt that Hitler himself was a madman. The other people involved either had to be mentally unbalanced in serious ways or else they had to be very psychologically disoriented to undertake a program of this sort and live with it from day to day. I can't really imagine that type of person who engaged in systematic, mass murder over a period of time, day after day, and lived with it.

Q: How long were you there?

A: I was there for maybe four hours.

Q: Did you see any German citizens around? Any people from the town?

A: There was nobody from the area, but, interestingly enough, the inmates told me that trucks went out into the surrounding villages each eight-hour shift and picked up people from the villages who came there and worked in the

camp during that shift.

Q: So they knew what was going on.

A: And the trucks then took them back and picked up the new shift and put these people back, so everybody in the surrounding villages knew what sort of a place they had there. But I felt that they, too, were victims of the system and, if they dared to raise their voice, they, too, would be put in this camp; so people were afraid under those circumstances to interject.

Q: Did you hear any talk among the soldiers about making reprisals against the Germans because of this?

A: We all felt very deep hostility toward the Germans before we saw this concentration camp layout and this just added fuel to our flames. Shortly after we got into Germany...[Mr. Glustrom says to someone else "The tape recorder's on."]

Q: What about the military? Did they help you in any way cope with this experience?

A: No, they didn't do anything.

Q: They didn't help you to relieve the tension?

A: But, I was going to say -- I remember now -- that the attitude of the American commanders as soon as we got into Germany and had been there for about a week changed. [At first] they wanted us to destroy everything and they didn't care if we killed Germans or what. But, about a week after we got in, the attitude changed and they wanted to preserve everything and just do the necessary damage to get the Germans to surrender.

Q: Did you have an opportunity to visit with a Rabbi or Chaplain or anyone?

A: No.

Q: No psychiatrist? No one helped you?

A: No, nobody helped me at any time or for any experience when I had to face death. I faced it alone and when I had to bury large numbers of dead people or witness large numbers of dead people, I had to do it on my own resources. And very few people got any help or were in a position to get help when they needed it in a crisis.

Q: Did you tell anyone about the camp?

A: Oh, yes. I talked about it continuously after that.

Q: Who did you talk with? Members in your group?

A: Yes. The people I came in contact with and most of our group wanted to see it for themselves if they could.

Q: Have you talked about it much since you came back home?

A: Well, from time to time, yes.

Q: Did you feel it was important for your wife to know about it?

A: I felt that she certainly would be interested in knowing about it.

Q: What about your children?

A: I have also told them because I felt they should know, too.

Q: Did you all see the *Holocaust* TV show?

A: I really think everybody should know about it and, yes, we saw the TV show.

Q: Did you think that that was worthwhile?

A: I thought it was worthwhile, but I thought it was quite a bit cleaned up from what the actual conditions were. In the first place, they would have to have "smellavision" to be able to tell what it was really like, and they could not possibly show the filth people had to live in who were in this camp.

Q: What do you think people can learn from this?

A: I think they can learn that they can become the victims of evil just as readily

today as they could any time through history.

Q: Should this be taught in schools or in religion classes? What is your feeling about it?

A: I think it should be taught, certainly, that nobody or no country is immune to depredations of the individuals within it who decide to take over in that manner.

Q: Have you ever had any unpleasant experiences from this, like nightmares?

A: I used to have that sort of thing, but that lasted two or three years and then I became able to digest it.

Q: What was the most striking thing about this experience to you? What struck you the most other than the feeling you have already said about man's inhumanity to man?

A: The helplessness of the individual in face of an organized system that has been very carefully calculated and designed in every physical and psychological way to control him and his destiny.

Q: Did you consider yourself a religious person at this time?

A: I have always considered myself a religious person in a sense of the word, but not in the sense that I have ever favored any organized religion of one type or another.

Q: Did you have any conscious thought about God or religion at the camp?

A: I had one impression that if there was a personal God He must be participating in this type of activity in some form or fashion to let it happen.

Q: Would you say that your feeling about God was different after this experience?

A: No, I think it was about the same.

Q: Did religion have any way that you viewed these prisoners?

A: No.

Q: Or the civilians or the Germans?

A: No.

Q: It didn't enter into it?

A: No. I didn't look at it as a religious matter.

Q: If you had been a prisoner, do you think your religion or your religious feeling would have helped you hold together or not?

A: No. It wouldn't. It didn't help me when I was facing death myself and so I had to have resources within myself. I don't know what you would call them -- whether psychological, religious or what -- but I had to have my resources to withstand the shock of death, possible death, and the shock of seeing mass death practiced against others.

Q: Did you feel that your religious thoughts, or your feeling about mankind, had any bearing on your feeling about the Nazis?

A: No.

Q: Have you had any change in your political views?

A: Yes. I came back home determined to try to correct some of the injustices that I had lived with since my childhood here in the South.

Q: Do you think you have had any success in this? Do you see that people's attitudes are changing toward one another or not?

A: I witnessed improvements in people's attitudes for some time, but after the 1954 Supreme Court decision on schools, I witnessed a sort of hardening of people's positions and even a reversal of attitudes. I witnessed for many years the Church not willing to participate in programs designed to bring equalized opportunities into the lives of various people in this country. Then the Church began to take an interest in this question and participate in it. So

the churches went counter to the general population in that respect. They did participate, except for here and there a brave, far-seeing individual.

Q: How do you feel about the Civil Rights Movement?

A: I feel very strongly about it. I participated in it quite heavily. I paid a big price for participating in the Civil Rights Movement. I was an officer of the Georgia Council on Human Relations for over twenty years. I was close to being one of the founders of it. I was vice president and an officer of The Atlanta Urban League for thirteen years. My wife and I were one of the founders of the Georgia Civil Liberties Union [CLU]Chapter, and I was the only continuous officer in the CLU for about fifteen years. I've been an officer in the Poverty Day Nursery Association for about twelve, fifteen years so one might say that I have participated actively in the Civil Rights Movement.

Q: What about the Viet Nam War? How did you feel about that?

A: At first, I felt like everybody else, and then as I got educated mainly by my sons I began to oppose it very strongly as our biggest mistake as a nation.

Q: What about the situation in the Middle East now?

A: In the Middle East now, I am hoping there will be peace and that Israel will survive as a viable state.

Q: What about things like the executions in Cambodia? Do you see the same thing happening again?

A: There too, one doesn't know whether to believe the stories or not to believe them because all you get is a newspaper version which hasn't had a great batting average. But, if they are taking place, they are sickening.

Q: Suppose that one of your children or grandchildren were to come to you and say they might want to be a Nazi. How would you feel?

A: I would feel like renouncing that child and not ever seeing them again or having anything to do with them.

Q: Do you see the Nazi movement as primarily a Jewish persecution?

A: It is also anti-Negro. It would become anti-any minority group. It starts out with the Jews and ends up wanting to control everything. I don't know if you ever read that statement by Pastor Niemoller who was in Germany during the time of the Nazis. It is a very effective statement in which he says...I could read it for you if you want.

Q: I've got two or three more questions and then we'll read it. Do you feel like your attitude toward the leaders of the Jews has changed or your feeling toward the Jews themselves? Do you think they were too docile?

A: No. I think they did the best they could under the circumstances. They themselves didn't believe that anybody could do this and by the time they did find out what was happening, it was too late for them to do anything about it. When they actually as a group, the ones who were still more or less free, realized what was happening, then they started trying to revolt and fight.

Q: Do you feel the need to do something today to make sure that something like this never happens again other than what you have already talked about? I know you have participated in different movements and things. I know you feel a need for it. Do you feel like it's going to be actually beneficial?

A: I don't know what people can do other than to teach man to somehow work within himself and his own feelings towards his fellow man. I think in order to help make others better, a person has to first make himself better. Otherwise, his work with others becomes nullified in his own selfishness and greed and intolerance. So, I believe that each individual needs to

become a better person himself in order to help society, and then I think a person should devote a portion of his time towards working with and in society. But I guess that's not happening so much because people are participating less and less in the processes of the society they live in. You can look at the voting record in this country and see that. This is fairly well known. It's by Pastor Martin Niemoller. He was a practicing minister in Germany of excellent reputation and then he had to experience the Nazis and this is what he said about them:

"In Germany, they first came for the Communists
and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist;
then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because
I wasn't a Jew; then they came for the trade unionists and
I didn't speak up because I wasn't a unionist; then they
came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I
was a Protestant; then they came for me and, by that
time, no one was left to speak up."

And so with that statement, I can tell you a little bit personally -- I'll just read it here -- that helped shape my life and create the type of climate for the kind of work I did towards racial justice and harmony in Atlanta. [Reading] "I was with an engineering regiment attached to General Patton's 3rd Army. Our mission was to destroy a single rail line behind the collapsing German Army so our heavy tanks would have a supply of gasoline, ammunition, and food. I was 24 years old and I was helping to spread the havoc that was being done in that war. The most shocking event of the war and of all my 61 years of life since then was a sudden visit to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp a few hours after its liberation. Its long rows of ovens were crackling

and smoldering over the bones and flesh of human fodder. The camp guards had just fled in trucks back into their prosperous homes in the nearby villages. Many inmates met us at the open gates in shabby uniforms -- frightened, bewildered, and dreading the possible return of their captors. Free, but surely, not so free. Many of these adult prisoners were thin -- their size indicating the term of their imprisonment -- on their less than subsistence rations. Their life had consisted of hard labor and steady starvation. A nauseating stench dominated the area like a thunderous discord and especially in the dormitories and sick rooms. The dormitory rooms were about 12 x 15 feet with 9 foot ceilings approximately. Wooden bunks without pads were every two feet, floor to ceiling around all the walls. Approximately 15 inches was allowed for ingress. There were approximately 54 persons wedged into these bunks in each room and then numerous others were crowded in on every foot of the floor. Unable to move, the occupant was forced to file his own mess and sleep in the common stench dominating everyone. Many rooms were used in three shifts. Diarrhea and dysentery were commonplace. It was like a giant cesspool. The sturdiest structure in the camp was the weirdly efficient crematorium. Outside of the crematorium, I saw a long flatbed trailer loaded with four layers of naked, starved bodies. At least 200 tiny adult corpses, weighing 40 to 60 pounds each, I guess, were stacked and tied like cord wood awaiting the ovens. This gruesome shipment had been transported along the German highways almost covered with canvas, but open enough to see under. Live prisoners were hauled into the camp by rail and by truck. Some were selected for work in the factories while their life lasted; the others were marked for final disposal taken into a room with simulated shower heads.

They stripped for the showers and were bolted into the room. The victims realized too late that gas, not water, came out of the nozzles. All the bodies were completely stripped of jewelry, gold teeth, and any other items of value before being thrown down a chute into the oven room. There was an administration building in front of the entrance gate with labs for medical experimentation on humans. Many lamps of tattooed skins were shown to me by the inmates in grisly display. They also told me of a factory building where they worked making soap and other items. The staff and guards lived in the nearby towns and were hauled back and forth from nearby villages for their shift in the round-the-clock operation. The way Buchenwald and other concentration camps operated in Germany had to be common knowledge. Apparently decent Germans felt helpless to fight against the very heavy ruthless system in control of their country. Like most Americans, I had never believed the atrocity stories about such a highly educated nation as Germany. Seeing Buchenwald is an intensive mental and emotional beating, uprooting and changing all the forces directing my life. Injustice became clearer to me and far less tolerable. And so I became ripe for the Civil Rights activity, which I engaged in on returning from five years of military experience.” So that describes essentially my feeling about the whole burden that was created for man to bear in his soul and his conscience for the rest of time.

Q: John, I surely do appreciate your time and your interesting story. You'll hear from us.