

NAME: MATTHEW NESBITT

INTERVIEWER: RUTH SCHEINBERG

CAMP: BERGEN BELSEN

DATE: AUGUST 7, 1980

A: My name is Matthew Nesbitt, I live at 1520 Farnell Court, Apt. 1832, Decatur, Georgia. 30033. My date of birth is 9/20/13, and I believe at the time of the liberation of Belsen, I was approximately 32 years of age. My profession at the beginning of the Second World War was a professional baseball player. Present occupation: I am involved in Public Relations. The military unit I served with was the Royal Canadian Air Force. At the time of the liberation, my rank was Sergeant, and the camp we liberated was Bergen Belsen.

Q: You were with the Royal Canadian Air Force. Where were you physically when you were approaching Bergen Belsen? From what direction were you coming?

A: We were going up to the northern part of Germany towards Schleswig Holstein.

Schleswig Holstein is in the northern part of Germany just near the Danish border, and I believe it was in the town...I'm not sure. I don't think it was [unintelligible], but it was the airport that was Hermann Goering's airport for his...they call it his Airdrome. And we had come in there and that's where I was at the time that I received word that there was such a thing as the concentration camp.

Q: Do you remember when you first heard of a concentration camp? Was there talk in the unit?

A: No, and none of us were aware of anything such as a concentration

camp. We had never heard anything.

Q: And you, as a Jewish man, had never heard, either?

A: No.

Q: Then you did not know what to expect? Did you have any idea of the atrocities you might encounter?

A: The only information I had was from the Padre, who informed us that there was such a thing as a concentration camp at Belsen, the night before we left. That was the first time we heard of it.

Q: As an American soldier, or as a Jew, did you have any personal feelings?

A: I was Canadian.

Q: You were Canadian at the time. I see. As a Jewish man, did you possibly have any particular feelings of hatred toward what you might encounter in a camp...?

A: [Unintelligible]

Q: Because of Hitler. Yes.

A: No, not at that particular time. I couldn't believe what I saw, but I think the important thing at that time was not to weigh your personal feelings, but to save as many people as possible.

Q: And your date of arrival, again, at the camp was approximately...?

A: My date of arrival, as I think back, I believe was in the early part of the winter 1945, rather than in the spring. I'm not too sure on the date actually.

Q: There was something that crossed my mind. When you actually entered the camp, were you the first man, the first group of men, to open the gates actually? Do you think that your unit was the first one to come into the camp?

A: Number one, we were volunteers. How we became aware of Bergen Belsen could be of interest. The night prior to us going to Bergen Belsen, there was a Jewish Padre who came into our unit, and he was crying so much and was so emotionally upset that our commanding officer couldn't make head or tail of it. Since I was Jewish, the C.O. called me in and said would I try to find out what he was talking about. We calmed him down a little bit, and then he continued to say that there was such a place as Bergen Belsen about 20 miles away from us, and they are in need of food and medical supplies, and could we help them. At that particular time, the military was moving in such a manner that the commanding officer had to ask for volunteers, rather than tell a certain group to go. So, he asked me if I would command the unit of volunteers. I picked up about 14 volunteers, which included doctors, anyone who was familiar with medicine and could help save lives, and we started out very early the next morning with a truckload of food, medical supplies and went right down to Belsen. When we got down to Belsen, there were 800, I believe, SS and Hungarian guards, both men and women, still in the camp.

Q: These men were still guarding the camp or they were in the camp or what? What are you saying? I don't understand.

A: They were still in the camp, but apparently there had been a small allied force that had preceded us, I think, the day before, and [unintelligible].

Q: Had probably actually opened the gates. But they remained there. They did not leave.

A: [Unintelligible] because the camp was just as it always was. Nothing had changed.

Q: Did you take these people prisoners, or did you not...? They just remained there?

A: We didn't have to take them prisoners. I spoke to the commanding officer and he said that he was willing to comply and I can understand why because the more lives we saved the better it would be for him. But all their arms had been stacked that morning. They had surrendered that morning, just prior, I believe, to us getting there. But their camp was still in operation, and the guards were still there.

Q: As you entered the camp, do you remember the actual description of the camp? How it looked to you or smells or any sounds?

A: Oh yes. I remember, but there is one thing I must point out to you. The first thing we had to do when we got to camp, prior to even distributing the food, was to make sure that we used the guards to separate the living from the dead in the huts. Because first of all, if we are going to save anybody, we had to know who was alive and who had to be buried. So, we made arrangements with the commanding officer for us to use all of the guards to find out who was alive and who was dead. The only way you could do that was to go into each individual hut and shake whoever was on that little slab. If they didn't move, they were dead. If there was any movement, we pulled them out and put them into a different section of the hut. We then instructed the guards to take the dead and pile them up outside in the so-called streets, at which time there were other guards who went by with trucks. I have pictures that I took myself showing the guards taking the bodies from the pile and tossing them into the trucks. There were so many bodies that we decided we had to have a mass grave -- just dig a big hole with bulldozers when they were available,

cover it up, and put lime on it. And that we intended to have the German guards do, both men and women. When I first got to camp, the stench was just beyond description. The camp itself was beyond description. The people were walking around without any idea where they were going. They were absolutely in a daze. One little girl came up to me and without any emotion whatsoever said, "My mother just died" and just turned around and walked away just as if death was an everyday occurrence. Of course, it was. But the conditions there are awfully difficult to describe. A picture can describe it, but words probably couldn't do it justice.

Q: Were there any prisoners there who were alert enough to realize that you were actually liberators? Were there some who realized this?

A: Yes. The next thing we had to do was to find out who among the inmates was able to help, who were coherent, and who could take a leadership role with the inmates so they could help themselves too. There were some, but not very many. A very small percentage.

Q: Did your commanding officer give you any instructions, as the man in charge there, on how to handle the prisoners, the inmates? For instance, with food. How did you handle the giving of the food to the people because I understand this was a difficult...?

A: That was terrible. The way we got the food for the inmates was voluntary contributions from the men who had received parcels from overseas, because we, ourselves, in our camp were moving so fast that we didn't have adequate food. So they very, very kindly consented to donate all of the extra things they had. We baked practically a truckload of bread the night before, and the smell of the bread caused an almost small riot when we got into the camp, but rather than use

the guards to control the people, we used the inmates who were coherent to control the people. You could see that the first thing the inmates who were coherent wanted to do after they had eaten was to get revenge, and we didn't want a blood bath in that camp at that particular time. So this took a little bit of diplomacy and persuasion.

Q: Did you have any difficulty when you saw these people in this tattered and absolutely terrible condition to relate to them as people? Some people have feelings of not being part of the picture, somehow. We have had people who have felt no real feeling toward them. Did you personally and how did your men feel?

A: My men were....

Q: Very compassionate?

A: Were extremely compassionate, and we had discussed immediately upon entering the camp that this is no time to show emotion. The job was to find the living and save and bury the dead, and feed the people who could eat. So whatever emotions we had, we tried to hide very much. Our job was just to save people. But, as far as my commanding officer was concerned, I had no instructions. And there were no instructions he could give me, because he had never been there, and he didn't know what the situation was. We did what we thought we had to do, and we did it on our own, and apparently it was the right thing to do.

Q: You didn't encounter any problems when you gave the people the bread because we have heard that some people ate so hungrily that death occurred. Did you have any such problem?

A: We knew that we should not give them too much at one time. So, again, the coherent inmates came into play at that particular time and

we put the responsibility of the welfare of the other inmates somewhat upon their shoulders too. And we told them we are here to save them, not to kill them. So, let us just give what we think they ought to have, and then we had a couple of nurses and a couple of doctors who also helped, but of course they weren't enough.

Q: Did you go around the whole camp of Bergen Belsen? I don't know the size of it.

A: Very big.

Q: And what did you find besides the areas where they lived? I mean did you find the ovens, the places of killing? Would you describe to some extent what you did find?

A: The ovens were still hot when we got there. On one or two of the conveyances that they used to put the people in the ovens, there were still some bodies. We had seen so many bodies when we came there that it was just another body. But, the living quarters for them was just beyond belief. They just had enough room to lie flat. They couldn't even turn around during the night, if they had to or wanted to in their sleep. Just enough room to lie there and nothing else. And the conditions we found there, for example, the sanitary conditions were just...there weren't any. Some of the people had lost complete respect, and I went into one of those huts or barracks, as they called them, and here is a man and a woman urinating and defecating in the corner, and everybody is talking and they pay no attention. Their self respect had been stripped of them. They were just walking in a state of shock and had no feelings and no concern, just waiting to die.

Q: Did you find any of the German guards? I know you said the Yugoslav guards or the other...?

A: The Hungarians.

Q: The Hungarians. But you did not find any German guards. They had already fled?

A: No, no. The German guards were still there too.

Q: There were some German guards?

A: Of the 800 guards, some were German men and women, and some were Hungarian men and women, of which I have pictures.

Q: I think you did say that. Right. I'm sorry. I just forgot about that. So, it seems to me you must have had a terrific job of restraining the people from doing anything to these guards. You did not have any problem?

A: We didn't, because I think we did a very, very intelligent thing to start with, with the lack of experience we had in that type of warfare, and that was to enlist the aid of the coherent inmates. That was the first thing we figured we should do. If we didn't, there was no control. There was no way only 14 people can handle 800 guards plus the officers, plus the inmates, so we solicited the cooperation of the coherent inmates and placed a lot of the responsibility on them and they reacted very, very admirably.

Q: Yes, it really seems like it was handled well. Among these guards there were SS men. Do you remember having any bad feelings particularly toward them? Did you treat them any differently?

A: No, we did not bother too much with the guards at all. We just told them that there are certain things that they had to do, and we think it is to their advantage to do it, and the commanding officer convinced them of the same thing.

Q: So you really seemed to have handled that in an unusually good

manner.

A: We knew what we had to do and went ahead and did it, because we were there 96 hours. And during that 96 hours, I don't think any of my people slept or stopped to eat too much. We just didn't have the time. We just wanted to clean it up as soon as we could.

Q: Did you find any German civilians at all in that area, or did they come from the nearby city? What was the nearby city if there was one?

A: I think there was a city about 20 miles away, and I believe it was called Bergen. I am not sure.

Q: We will check on that. Did any German civilians come to the camp for any reason?

A: Not while I was there. In fact, when we left the camp and were going back to our airport, our station, we stopped in Bergen Belsen and I found the *Burgermeister*. I asked him if he was aware of the fact that there was a concentration camp with the killings that went on. He said nobody knew that such a camp existed, but it was hard to believe because you could smell the camp right in that town itself. There was no way they could not know.

Q: Did you actually bury all the people you found dead? It seems it was a tremendous job.

A: We started to, but there was no way we could have finished. The Allied forces who came up -- I believe it was 96 hours later -- finished it. There are a couple of numbers that are fixed in my mind. I believe there were 60,000 inmates originally in that camp or more, and I believe when we reached there, it was less than half of that population that could be saved. So there was a lot of burying to be done.

Q: I would like to talk a little bit about how the men with you coped or

discussed this experience afterwards. Was there conversation afterwards? Do you feel it had a great deal of impact on any of the the men? Say, the 14 men who went with you.

A: It certainly did have an impact. Number one, they were reluctant to discuss it, because they felt that even though they had been there and did what they did, which was great, they didn't know how anybody could believe the conditions they would describe, because it was beyond human comprehension without actual photographic evidence. So, of course they were touched, and we all got a leave after that. We went away. They flew us up to England, I believe, for seven days, and yes, it made an impression on them. No doubt of it.

Q: Do you remember if there was anyone that might have a stronger reaction, someone just unable to cope with this at all?

A: I wouldn't say unable to cope with it, but we had to watch our men pretty closely too, because of the emotions that could be cultivated there. There was one instance where my right hand man almost went out of control when he had detailed some of the Hungarian guards to pick the bodies up and put them in the truck. He was smoking a cigarette -- and I remember this very vividly -- and one of the German guards on the truck saw him flick his cigarette butt away and wanted to get off the truck and pick up the cigarette. The last thing my man wanted to give these people was anything at all, and when he saw that, he made a move toward his pistol. I was there and I said, "Just hold it, let's not start anything. We've got a job to do." And that's the only instance I had with my people where they might have gotten out of control.

Q: Among these 14 men, was there a chaplain of any kind there?

A: Yes, I believe the chaplain who told us about this condition came back with us the following morning, at the same time we did. He stayed with us overnight and he came back with us the following morning, so he was one of the 14.

Q: Of the people you found, would you say that most of them were Jewish or were there other nationalities? Gypsies, Russians, Polish?

A: I would say, to the best of my knowledge, I don't think there were any Russians or Polish people there. The majority were Jews, but there were many, many people there who were not Jewish, who were intellectuals, professors, doctors, lawyers, very intelligent people.

Q: Political dissenters?

A: Political dissenters or just people who had done well, which the Nazis objected to for no apparent reason and put them in the concentration camps. In my discussion with some of these people, the Nazis really didn't have to have a reason to put you in the concentration camps. If you had something they wanted, they took it and sent you away.

Q: Sure. That's just about how it did work.

A: Yes, but the concentration camps were not populated only by Jews.

Q: Yes, that is a proven fact, of course. But did the chaplain use his offices in any way in the burying of the dead or giving comfort or did he actually just help in the distribution of the food and medicine?

A: He really went around and just became one of the group to help us separate the living from the dead. To go ahead and do what he normally would have to do during his work, we could have lost some people while he was doing that.

Q: That's right. Very good. During this time, and maybe during your rest and recreation period when you went to England after this, did you

write home to anyone about this situation that you saw?

A: No, when we got to England, I was told to advise my people that this is not the time to write letters home and discuss these things and that they would appreciate very much if we just said nothing about it, and to sort of let it drop, and they would take care of the publicity.

Q: But then in later years when you did come home, did you discuss this with anyone? I don't know whether you were married or not at the time, possibly a wife or a mother, sister, intimate friend?

A: No, not really.

Q: Not really until these years?

A: Not really.

Q: And over the years, not with any veterans organizations or anyone?

A: No.

Q: And this is your first experience of really talking at any length?

A: Except during some meetings when people would talk about it, I would bring it up, like at the Center.

Q: But you have never been interviewed nor have shown your pictures on official...?

A: No, I wasn't anxious to do that until I was sure that people were making an effort to make people aware of the Holocaust, because I can't do anything myself. I am willing to help if there is a movement.

Q: Right. So when you and your friend saw this write-up about Emory University making this Witness to the Holocaust program, you decided to come in. Is that correct?

A: Yes. I called up, and they sent me a letter, and this is the culmination of that letter.

Q: Are you married or were you married at the time of liberation?

A: Yes, I was married at the time.

Q: And when you returned home, did you tell your wife of this at all?

A: No.

Q: You didn't. Do you have children?

A: No.

Q: No children. Did you happen to see this *Holocaust* TV show about two or three years ago?

A: Yes. I did.

Q: Do you feel it was a fair picture or not? What was your reaction when you saw some of it or part of it?

A: I really didn't feel that it portrayed the true story. It was dramatized, and I think primarily they were interested in making a good movie out of it, rather than telling the truth.

Q: Thank you. Do you think that our idea of recording this information has value? Do you think that what we are doing, not only us but possibly other people, at this time, 35 years later, has value and why? What do you think? What would your suggestion be that we could use?

A: Yes. I think that although we started late, the old cliché comes into effect, better late than never. I feel that we have a moral responsibility to a lot of these people to show them that these things have happened before and that they can...before they can happen again. You have an incident right here up in Marietta [Georgia] with this [J.B.] Stoner and how he gets on TV and says what he does about other people, and yet he is talking to the people who went overseas and were willing to get killed and maimed to fight against people like Stoner. How he gets away with it I'll never know. I know it's been a topic of conversation

among veterans who have been inside concentration camps, and this is how these things start -- through a little "Stoner." People think that he cannot ferment trouble, but Hitler was nothing but a paperhanger, and look what happened. And Stoner is a lot better educated than him, so I think that people should squelch these thing in the bud. They have no right to do this in my estimation.

Q: There is a decided effort in the schools now to educate the children to know what their parents went through in this generation, not only the German people, but the American people.

A: That's right.

Q: And do you think this has value?

A: Absolutely. I think the only way is through education. I mean man's inhumanity to man is inconceivable. People can't understand it, but it is possible.

Q: And it happens not only to Jewish people, but you mentioned that in the camp you found other people who disagreed or, as you say, were rich and they took whatever they wanted from them.

A: This is what a lot of people don't understand, Ruth.

Q: Yes. This is what I'm trying to get through.

A: They think it was primarily Jewish people. Basically, I would say it was possibly 60% Jewish people and 40% Christian people. And people will not believe or will not try to understand that Nazism was against all of the intellectual people, including Jewish people. They killed the cream of society of the Gentile people, of the Christian people.

[End of Side One. Side Two resumes as follows.]

Q:personal question in continuation of your thoughts after the liberation of the camp. Did you personally encounter any problems with yourself such as nightmares or eventually have to see a counselor for help?

A: No.

Q: You did not. Very good. I want to discuss any part that religion might have played in this. At the time of liberation, did you consider yourself a religious man?

A: Not really. I just observed the holidays. I am not anti-religious but I am not real Orthodox.

Q: But when you saw these horrible situations, did a connection or thought come into your mind such as how God could let such a thing happen or did you feel resentful that it was happening?

A: I felt resentful that it was happening, but I didn't feel....

Q: Not as a religious person.

A: Not as a religious person, no.

Q: And this was the way you viewed the inmates and the SS men, you looked as a human being rather than from a religious point of view. It never bothered you in a religious way.

A: No.

Q: And the civilians I guess the same thing then. But did you ever think that if you had been on the other side of the fence, if you had been one of these inmates, how you would have kept your faith, how you would have survived? Would religion have entered into it, do you think, or maybe just your sheer ability or desire to live? Did you think in those terms at all?

A: No, I really didn't, because during the war, there's many times that you want to feel that religion has something to do with you getting hurt or escaping getting hurt. You have the opportunity to do that. I am more or less a fatalist. I believe if it's going to happen, it is going to happen and there's nothing you can do to stop it. So, religion didn't enter into it.

Q: Did you, later, then have any thoughts about forgiving the Nazis? Did you feel that you understood how things came about with them?

A: I didn't forgive them because this situation could have been prevented. As I said before, when they have the same situation here and everybody thinks that it is impossible, they thought the same thing in Germany. They thought it was impossible. In other words, it can't happen to us. It can only happen to "them." This is a bad attitude to have. I believe that people in Germany, more or less, brought it upon themselves. Sure I feel sorry for them and hope it never happens again, but I believe the people themselves can prevent these things from happening if they have the courage to do so and will speak out and nip it in the bud before it gets a good toehold on the nation, any nation, whatever it may be.

Q: Do you plan to go back to visit this area when you go to Europe the next time?

A: Yes, I would go back. I would go back because Germany is still a beautiful country, and not everybody I met there was a Nazi. Some people had been involved and took very little part in the Nazi program, so there are some people that I remember who were a disgrace to the Nazi party more or less, but a credit to the human race. But very few.

Q: But they were there.

A: They were there.

Q: And you did see some?

A: Yes.

Q: From a political point of view, having undergone not only the World War II experience, but this horrible experience on top of it, did it change any of your political views, or influence you as you came home? You were still an active young man and went into a different field. I see public relations.

A: What sort of view are you referring to?

Q: Did you feel that you ought to take a stronger part in the government to see that such things would not occur? I was anxious to know if you became active in the political scene in any way.

A: No, I didn't become active in the political scene.

Q: Nor did you take any part in the civil rights movement that came up? Did you feel that this had any bearing, a direct relationship on the experience you had?

A: I believe in the civil rights, but I didn't take any part in it.

Q: And now that we have gone through a Viet Nam War and there are problems in the Middle East, and we hear of executions and the fighting and the life in Cambodia and in the East there and we know that many of these things that you witnessed are happening there, have you any ideas what we can do to combat this in way or what we as Americans should be doing? That's kind of a loaded question, and I don't mean to put you on the spot.

A: I know that, yes.

Q: We are just really trying to learn ourselves, too, and if we glean the

least bit of information from anyone maybe it will help us out.

A: Yes. I believe we have to start to clean up our own backyard first. I am sorry to say that there may be some honest men in the political scene. I haven't met them yet, but I imagine there must be. I believe that if we can clean up the political scene and put some honest people in government, whoever they may be or whatever party they are from, that this is the step in the right direction, and we have to help ourselves and then help others. We can't go all over the world helping these unfortunate people when our country is falling apart. We've got to do something for ourselves. For example, President Carter and the presidents before him say they want to cut the budget. That's fine, but they're cutting the budget at somebody else's expense. If they would just cut out some of the overhead that they have, the people they don't need, the patronizing, the paperwork, they could balance the budget just in Washington by only using the people they need. They have more people to do one man's job than is necessary, so that is where the economy should start. That would save energy, balance the budget, and we would be in good shape, but we need honest politicians.

Q: It seems we have to start somewhere. Of course, education is probably the beginning. Do you feel a need to do something today to make sure that this doesn't happen again? Do you personally feel that need? Say, in politics, education, or religion, or in your occupation or maybe even in your personal contacts. Do we, as a generation of people who have undergone WW II and particularly the Holocaust which you have viewed, have an obligation to the world or to ourselves even?

A: Yes, we do. We certainly do.

Q: Where should we start?

A: I believe we have an obligation to ourselves and we have an obligation to our fellow human beings. Again, this goes back to education. I believe that if we have enough people who went through this thing and saw what they saw, they can go out and talk to the people. This would make a big difference in the years to come. We could stop these people from saying "it can't happen here." They said that in Germany and it did happen, and there is no way to say that people like Stoner won't get a lot of help and start some trouble here. And we'll be in a lot of trouble before we head it off.

Q: I really think we have covered a great deal of territory. I think you've been extremely explicit and very, very helpful. These notes will go into the archives of Emory University, and Mr. Nesbitt has kindly brought us some very fine photographs of scenes at Bergen Belsen, which we will make photocopies of. These were taken by official photographers, were they not?

A: Some were [unintelligible].

Q: Some were official photographers. I thank you very much for coming and I think you have been extremely helpful.