

Press, Charles  
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One Video Cassette

Abstract:

Charles Press joined the US Army in July of 1943. He served in Europe and after the war was assigned to the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp near Czechoslovakia. Mr. Press was not Jewish and had never heard about concentration camps. He describes the emaciated conditions of the few survivors and the conditions they lived in. He tried to help them, and even went to services with them. His job involved guarding SS troops, whom he described as arrogant and without remorse. Mr. Press never discussed what he saw, but he asked questions of others about their reactions to the Holocaust. Even in his later years, he still cannot describe his own reactions, although he is eager to talk about the Holocaust.

00:00 My name is Charles Press. I was born on May 30, 1920 in Harrisburg, PA. I entered the Army voluntarily in July of 1943.

00:30 Until I volunteered, I had been deferred to work on the railroad until the end of the war. However, after seeing my friends join the Army, I felt like a draft dodger.

01:00 My superintendent tried to dissuade me, but finally agreed to let me go in. I was 23 years old.

01:30 When I entered the army, I was sent to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, and the 572<sup>nd</sup> Anti-Aircraft Battalion. The Battalion was not involved in liberating the camps, but I was later an infantry replacement and was sent to the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The 90<sup>th</sup> ended up in the Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Q. When did you hear about it?

A. Right after the war in May 1945. At that time, I believe I was a Private First Class.

02:30 The Flossenbürg concentration camp was located on the edge of Czechoslovakia and Germany, about six kilometers from the border.

03:00 I was not aware that there was a concentration camp until we got there. We were following Patton's Army, I think we were in the Thuringian Mountains.

03:30 I remember a city called Hirschberg (Jelenia Góra), where there had been a tank battle. I think it was in Schwarzenbach that I broke a tooth out of my partial and went to the medics after the battle. I was on my way back when the Germans

- attacked. I was thrown out of the Jeep, and I ended up back in France, with the 21<sup>st</sup> General. I was there for three weeks, and then the war ended.
- 04:30 I was a bazooka man. I carried the ammunition. The fellow who took my place was killed when the outfit was ambushed by some SS after the war was over. I rejoined my outfit after that time.
- 05:00 I didn't go directly to Flossenbürg. First I was sent back to the 21<sup>st</sup> General. Then I went to the Flossenbürg Camp, where my unit was stationed at the time. They were operating the camp. It was just a few days after the end of the war. It was the first time that I knew anything about concentration camps.
- 06:00 We were so flabbergasted and angry that anything like this could have happened. When we saw the crematoriums still smoldering and the shoes piled up against the crematoria, we just could not believe it.
- 06:30 Q: When you first walked in and saw these scenes, did you realize what this had been?
- A: Not exactly. Not until it dawned on us that it must be some kind of place where the Germans had been killing people.
- Q: How did this understanding evolve?
- A: I can't remember what my impressions were.
- Q: Tell us what else you saw?
- 07:30 There were gravesites that were almost six square feet. There were ashes and human bones thrown into these sites. I realize now that whenever the bodies were brought out of these crematoria, their ashes, which were still smoldering, would be put in the gravesites.
- 08:00 The sites were six to eight square feet. They were much deeper than six feet. The only other things there were the buildings. But I don't even remember them.
- 08:30 The buildings we were in were in pretty good shape. The beds in the sleeping quarters of the inmates, the unfortunate people, were in single cots, and we were told they would sleep in shifts. There were 30,000 people in the camp, and they would work in shifts.
- 09:30 Four people slept on a bed. I don't remember seeing towers. There was probably wire. The entrance to the camp was very narrow. I wish I had pictures because we stood right there.

10:00 We were standing right in front of the sign that said "Flossenbürg." I don't recall the size of the camp.

Q: When you entered and saw all the structures, did you see any living people?

A: Yes, there were about 70 people just wandering around. There was a little town just six kilometers in Czechoslovakia. These people were wandering from one place to another. They were Jewish survivors.

Q: What did the people look like?

A: They were emaciated. You wondered how they had survived. They were just bones. I don't remember their clothes. They were not wearing uniforms. I don't remember how many were males or females.

12:00 The majority were Jewish, but there were some Poles, possibly others. I don't know where they came from.

13:00 I had some money that I had gotten in my travels. There was a place where the Germans had hidden their spoils from Poland and elsewhere. They had stored money -- packs of German marks -- which had never been used. I had a big pack, which I gave to them and told them to use for whatever they could buy. My unit got there before I did. We were the guards; a few days after the war ended, they brought some German SS in as prisoners of war.

14:30 We had to guard the camp against any escapes. We marched the German SS up from the railroad station. The American soldiers, Jewish or Gentile, were so upset because of what they had seen at the camp. We marched them up with fixed bayonets, and if we had not been told not to harm them, I don't know what the guys would have done. They were even more upset about the situation than some of the Jewish soldiers.

15:30 Before then, we were just getting settled. Some of us went into this little town and went to religious services with the Jews. We got along with them. They were so happy that they were liberated. I don't remember any conversations with other Americans about the situation at the time.

16:30 I don't know how long we guarded the Germans because I was only there a short time. I had an offer to go to school in England or to remain as a supply sergeant. I chose to go to England. I never went back to the camp after that. The Germans were very arrogant. They did not think they had done anything wrong.

17:30 They were very -- the word *shtolts* comes to mind, which in Jewish (Yiddish) means "proud," proud of the fact that they were German soldiers. They didn't think anything they had done was wrong.

18:00 Q: Did you hear them remark in anyway in an anti-Semitic manner?

A: I don't remember that.

Q: When was it that you left the camp?

A: Let's see—my brother came to visit me and it was shortly thereafter that I had the opportunity to go to England. I must have been there about a month, but I don't remember.

19:00 Q: Were you involved in questioning them?

A: No.

Q: You mentioned you went into the town and interacted with the survivors. Did you interact with any of the local people?

19:30 A: No, other than going into a store to buy something.

Q: Did you get any sense of whether the local people had any idea of what was going on in the camp?

A: I don't know. I don't remember.

20:00 I returned to the US in April 1946.

Q: When you came back, did you ever discuss what you saw with anyone?

A: No, never.

20:30 Q: Throughout the years, have you had an opportunity to observe the reactions of Americans when they learn?

A: I have asked questions to get a reaction. There are mixed emotions about it. Some don't want to talk about it. Others can't believe that it happened. They are just amazed that something like this could happen to the human race. Just the other day, I was talking to a German, and he said there are groups of people that believe nothing ever happened.

21:30 I can't believe anyone would think that way.

Q: Can you describe for us what the crematoria looked like?

A: They were big brick buildings. They weren't that big, really. They were square buildings. The dimensions were something like 100 square feet. That's the exterior. I don't remember if I went in.

Q: How has this experience affected the rest of your life?

A: At first, I wouldn't think about it, and it had no bearing. It's only recently that the Holocaust has come to the forefront of my mind, and I try to talk about it whenever I can. I don't know why I didn't want to talk about it before. I don't know whether I wanted to block it out because it was such a terrible experience, or whether I was just young and not thinking about it. Now, it doesn't make me feel good. I still don't want to talk about it.

Q: Do you think this experience could give meaning to others?

A: Absolutely.

24:30 I think this should be a lesson to all of us. It happened once, and it could happen again, if we're not careful.

25:00 There is so much tyranny and immorality in the world. I believe God has his ways of taking care of people who are immoral.

25:30 Q: Is there anything you would like to add?

A: No. I could give you some more authentic pictures. Maybe one of these days I will find them and send them to you.