

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Harold B. Herbst
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Harold B. Herbst, conducted by Gail Schwartz on May 15, 1992 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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HAROLD B. HERBST

May 15, 1992

Q: Could you please tell us your full name.

A: My name is Harold B. Herbst.

Q: When and where were you born?

A: I was born in New York City on February the 19th, 1912.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your childhood.

A: My father at that time had these vending machines that were in the subways and elevators. It was quite a nice business. But when World War II came along, they couldn't get sugar. So he had to let the business go, and we moved to Detroit. In Detroit my dad became a businessman and opened up a laundry. From there on I spent the rest of my life so far in that particular Detroit, Michigan. Now, during the childhood the things I can remember, the things that stick out, is that as a child my mother had my brother and I sitting on her lap on a windowsill on Fifth Avenue watching the parade coming back from the first world war. I also had the pleasure of riding in one of the last horse-and-buggy street cars of New York. Then the next thing of memory is when I was 12 years old I started taking piano lessons, and when I was 14 I started playing square dances professionally with a fiddle player, violin player. Square dance people prefer to call themselves fiddle players. Then I went to the public school system in Detroit and graduated from high school after I dropped out of school when I was in eleventh grade. When I dropped out, I got interested in music again and went into Vaudeville for a period of about three, four months. And when I came back, I had a good friend who talked me into going back to school, which I did. And he enrolled me into the Castech (phonetic), which is one of the schools that was set aside for advanced students. I was fortunate because my friend happened to be the director of the Board of Education at that time. And I went through the school system of Detroit, Michigan. Went to Castech. Then went to Wayne University in Detroit and continued my education into the medical field. Premedics was at Wayne University. Medics was at Wayne University. I graduated from Wayne as a doctor and immediately after spending a short period of internship became a member in the United States Army as a first lieutenant.

Q: What year did you graduate from medical school?

A: 1942. And then I had my internship, and I started residency. And from the residency I was drafted and ended up in the Army. Went in training at a field hospital.

Q: When was that?

A: That was in '43. And for the purpose of training for a majority of -- for a major.

Q: Did you specialize in anything at that point?

A: At that time I was in surgery. I was a resident in surgery, and I continued that. When I was in the Army, I was placed in the hospital as a surgeon for the 170 VAC hospital.

Q: Where was that?

A: At that time it was just being organized. We were the youngest group of enlisted men. The doctors were quite young. It was more like an experimental hospital for the Army because they used to always hire -- not hire -- but place people of 35 or older in hospitals and save the young fellows for the infantry and so forth. So we were quite a young group in general. From there we went overseas in March.

Q: March of '43?

A: Of 1943. And ended up in Belfast, Ireland, our first stop. We were training our enlisted men for hospital duty in the hospital and were getting acquainted with the materials that we had to use when we were on the battlefield. The training would be every day. The enlisted men would have classes and would actually practice on each other to develop their techniques. From there we moved to Denby (phonetic), which was in North Ireland -- North England. And Denby, England -- we were there again training waiting for the invasion to occur. The invasion came, of course, on the 4th of June I think it is. The exact date I don't remember. But we were scheduled to go behind the Army and over to France in July, the first of July. And that's when we went across the English Channel and into the French territory. From there we were placed at first with the first Army, who was at the beachhead wiping up the remains of pockets -- the remaining pockets of Germans that were left behind. It was the policy at that time for the Army to move forward as fast as it can and not try to destroy all the Germans as we go but bypass them and let the infantry come in and finish up the work that we started. That's when we first started seeing patients in the hospital. From there we followed to the third Army with Patton, and this was in France. The first place was a beachhead. The second place was the base of the Brest peninsula, and the third place we went to -- and this was in a matter of less than a month or so -- was Crosan (ph.), which was a little bit north of Brest. As I said, we were with Patton, and we were transferred to the 9th Army at that time. And then we finally came back and went back to Patton, and we followed them clear -- one of the hospital units that followed him clear across Europe until the end of the war. We were in all the major battles at Brest and Grodan (ph.). And then we got involved in the Bastogne, which was where the battle of the Bulge was. We were the only hospital functioning in the Bulge proper at the time, to our knowledge. We didn't know of any other hospital at that time. In fact, our hospital was listed as being missing because the communication was so bad during the Bulge. During that time we worked as much as 12 hours every day anyway, but I can remember that I saw 28 -- did 28 operations in those 12 hours we were so busy. As for the surgeons in the unit, we spent most of the time in the hospital doing surgery. Very little time to explore too much around the area. And we were

always kept busy because we were behind Mr. Blood and Guts, Patton, and he moved fast. From there we went on and ended up in Regensburg when the peace came, when it was declared, armistice was declared. And it moved back to Wurzburg where we at that time started to disband the hospital. I came back to the States in 19 -- in fact, I arrived back in the States New Year's of 1946.

Q: Let's just back up a little bit. Let's trace some of the things that you commented on.

A: That's right. During that trip across the continent of Europe, we came very close to a city called Weimar (phonetic) I think was the name. And I was sent on a mission by the colonel to Weimar. And in the course of conversation with a police officer in a police station, he told me that the Germans had just left Buchenwald, a concentration camp that was based in Germany in one of the most -- one of the larger ones and most famous for the various things that they did and the cruelty that left a mark on people for life. He gave me directions as to how to go to Buchenwald. He told me it was a five-mile route, and he showed me the road. I got in a Jeep with my driver. We went out to see what we could see. I'll tell you the story of that. It was riding through a countryside which was green and very interesting in itself, and we came upon the gates of Buchenwald.

Q: How long a ride was it?

A: It was five miles. So I would say probably about 20 minutes. Not too much of a ride from Weimar. In fact, it couldn't be too much of a ride because part of the story -- the prisoners would be paraded down the same road into Weimar on weekends and paraded through the city where people would throw garbage and everything else on them.

Q: Did you have any particular thoughts on that ride out?

A: At the time riding out I didn't know what I was going to see. We had heard all sort of rumors of the various concentration camps. We had taken care of our own soldiers who happened to be captured at the Bulge and came back to the unit after we overran the Germans, and the average -- of our own soldiers -- the average weight they would lose would be 38 pounds in a matter of two and a half months. And they would tell us the stories that they had, and we thought that was terrible. But we found out that it wasn't nearly as bad as what happened in Buchenwald. When I walked into the gates of Buchenwald, there weren't any other soldiers in Buchenwald at that time, and I felt that I was probably the first one through the gates. The odd part about it -- the prisoners were walking around. The gates were wide open. The prisoners were walking around in groups and talking, but I couldn't understand why there was no American soldiers or anybody who would guard the gates or anything. They were wide open. Later on I found out that what had happened is that the SS troopers who were running the camp fled from the camp on April 11th, and the underground which was in existence in Buchenwald, in and about Buchenwald, took over the camp with the help of the prisoners and started straightening out the camp before the American soldiers even arrived, which was a day or two later.

Q: What did you see at the gates when you pulled up?

A: When we pulled up, there was a big emblem on the top of the gate which stated -- and the words might be not exactly right -- but it said, "You enter through the gates, and you leave by the way of the furnace" or chimney. "Chimney" is the word they used. That was there in German in a great big emblem. It was very prominently in a spot where you couldn't help from seeing the emblem. Then when you walked into the gate in front of me --

Q: The gate was open?

A: The gate was open, and prisoners were walking in and out freely. No resistance. Nobody checking them or anything like that.

Q: Now, how long was that after the liberation of the camp?

A: How long after the --

Q: Liberation of the camp did you go in?

A: The SS troopers left on April 11th. This must have been either the 13th or the 12th -- the 13th -- that I was there. I can't remember the exact date because when we were working like we did, we didn't even know what date it was sometimes. In the hospital we didn't keep track. But it was that time. I have it on the chart.

Q: Did your driver stay with you?

A: The driver was with me. It's customary that -- I was a captain at that time, and it's customary that officers didn't drive a vehicle. We had always a driver to drive us, and he also entered the camp with me.

Q: You walked in on foot?

A: We drove up there in the Jeep and left it outside of the first gate or right inside of the first gate and walked from there on. Right in front of us was three barracks. Quite large. Went up about three to four floors in height. And they were stationed one next to each other. And I remember walking up to the -- the first two you couldn't get in. They were locked. The doors were locked. There was nobody walking with me. Nobody to stop me or prevent me from doing anything I wanted to do. And my purpose was to see as much as I could and try to see what this was all about. But the third barracks was open, and I have taken pictures of that, which we'll probably show later on. And I had the opportunity to talk to the prisoners in the barracks, and some of the stories that I'll tell you are from what the prisoners have told me. We had a pretty good idea before I went in there from our stories that we got out of our own soldiers and the prisoners that we took about things that were happening in these camps, but

until you actually see them, it's hard to believe. In fact, when I came out of the Army, I didn't talk to anybody or even take all the things I had put in my locker and so forth that I'd brought back with me for over 46 years until now because it's nothing that you like to talk about. Besides that when you start telling the story, the people -- they look at you, and they say, oh -- they have the look that we really can't believe that. Well, the same ideas went through our head when we were looking at it. How can you believe this? After I got through visiting the first camp and talking to the men, they would -- when the camp became crowded --

Q: Let's back up a little bit. You were looking into the barracks, and what did you see?

A: Well, there were these little bunks that they had. They were about six-by-four's. And they were originally made -- and part of this comes from the prisoners themselves -- they were originally made for four people to sleep in. And there were three decks going up of these bunks the length of the barracks on both sides of the barracks. And when the camp got crowded, they'd double up. And sometimes they had as many as twelve men in a place that would sleep three. And the sanitary conditions were terrible, and the stories that the prisoners told is how these people would get sick and have dysentery or so and would not be able even to go to the corner of the building or so -- wherever they could go -- and they couldn't even get out of bed. So whatever they had to do they did, and from the top it just drained right down to the prisoners below. My impression at that time after I left that was that these barracks were probably the very last barracks the prisoner would be put in before they would be put to death in the furnaces or other means. Many of them died from disease.

Q: Were there people in the barracks --

A: There were many people in the barracks that I spoke to.

Q: What --

A: There were at least five or six in one of my camera shots.

Q: How did you speak to them?

A: The prisoners that were in the barracks wouldn't give you an idea of what happened to the other two barracks because they were the most recent prisoners, and they looked like they were still well fed. They were entirely different than what was remaining in the other two barracks, which we couldn't get in. But we know about them because we got the story back that they had to close those doors because they couldn't leave these people walk around. They were infected with all sort of diseases, dysentery, and many of them were in the last stages. You couldn't do anything for them anyway. So they locked the doors on them.

Q: How did you communicate to the prisoners you talked to?

A: Well, that's the interesting part. It's amazing how many Germans were able to speak English.

Then you find out that in Germany part of the school system teaches the children when they're in the third, fourth grade -- they start them on three languages -- German, French and English. And this is part of their educational system.

Q: How large was the barracks when you went in?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: How large was the barracks when you went into them?

A: Let me see if I can estimate. 32 by -- they were much larger than 60 -- I'm thinking of a telephone pole, which are usually 32 feet. They were much larger than 60 or 75 feet in length, and in width I would say about 40 feet or so, each barrack. I didn't have an opportunity to count the amount of cubes that were in there, but that would be my estimate -- what I would estimate them to be.

Q: What was the response of the prisoners to you?

A: It seemed they were unusually quiet. They didn't react in a normal way, and I got the feeling they were afraid that tomorrow the Americans would be driven out and the Germans would be coming back. So they sort of didn't speak too much. You practically had to force them to give you answers sometimes by talking to them and sort of getting answers from them. But that was the feeling I had because they didn't -- even when I walked through the camp, they didn't even bother to look up to see who was coming. So that the feeling I had is that they all had -- frankly, one of them said that, "We don't know how long you're going to be here." They were afraid that the Germans might return, and that was the impression I received. But the funniest thing -- not the funniest but one of the most memorable parts of that particular time that I walked through these barracks, walked around the barracks -- I was walking in back of the barracks just to see what was back there. And as I walked by, a little window that probably was about one foot square or thereabouts -- I heard a voice, and I turned around and I saw a living skeleton talk to me, was talking to me, and he said, "Thank God the Americans have come." And that was a funny feeling. Did you ever talk to a skeleton that talked back? And that's what I was doing. Later on I saw mounds of these living -- I mean these skeletons that the Germans left behind them. That brings back the story that when the prisoners -- when the SS troopers left, the underground took over, as I said, and they cleaned up a lot of the things. So that didn't exist very long. When I left those barracks, I went up to the administration building, which was closer to the front of the camp itself, Buchenwald, and then talked to several of the prisoners there and one in particular who had a specimen bowl that we usually use in labs -- glass specimen bowl that was about -- oh, I'd say about ten inches high and about four inches wide. And in there was three sections of skin that had tattoos on them in this vase which was saturated in a liquid of preservative. And the prisoner told me -- and he held it up for me to take a picture of -- he told me when the prisoners would first come into the camp, they would be lined up. And the Commander's wife would walk down the line, and wherever she saw anybody with a tattoo she would point to them,

and that was the last they saw of the prisoner. And this is the stories from the prisoners. And it just happens that what they were doing -- they would get the skin off the people, and they were making lampshades out of them. These lampshades were in the building there. I didn't have a chance to get into the building at the time, but my nurse did with other nurses. And they had witnessed about four or five lampshades that were made out of -- the top of it was made out of the skin of men with tattoos on them for them to give. One in particular was made for Goehring -- and this is from my nurse that she had seen. It was made for Goehring, and they said this was made only of the fliers that were downed in the war that they had taken these tattoos from. That was one of the things that sort of makes you feel very empty inside to think that people would be that barbaric. The Jews in the camp --

Q: One moment. When you came into the camp, you were by yourself with your driver.

A: I was with myself and a driver all the way through it except when I -- pardon me.

Q: Did the rest of your unit join you at all?

A: No. Just the two of us. We walked around ourselves. There were many people, as you will see, in the camp, but they never came over and tried to start a conversation or anything. They'd walk through -- just like I said, I think they were afraid --

Q: You had said your nurse had seen evidence of skin that was made into a lampshade, and I was wondering --

A: Oh, she had been in -- she actually got into the building at the time. That was a week or so later. So that they had different -- incidentally, Eisenhower dictated an order that every person in Weimar would be taken to the camp to see what the Germans had done there because they denied that they knew anything about it. In talking to the prisoners, they would tell -- they told me that on weekends they would be paraded through the city, like I mentioned before, and these people would be lined up throwing the tomatoes and garbage and everything else on it. That was so ridiculous to think that they would deny that they didn't know what was happening.

Q: Let's go back. You left the barracks, and then you said you walked over to the administration building?

A: Will you repeat that, please.

Q: Let's go back a little bit. You had left the barracks, and then you started to walk. And you saw a man holding the --

A: Yeah. That was at the administration building. On the right was the barracks for the SS troopers, and on the left was the administrating building itself. And down on the right there was a wired-off place with irregular -- the wire they use for entrapment.

Q: Barbed wire?

A: Barbed wire where they used to put the prisoners in when they first came off the train. They'd march them in there, and then they'd pass them in through the building and give them their clothes they were supposed to where and orient them. And that was right across the street. Then down from there the road continued on, and there was another section that led to another area which probably was the barracks for doctors or the officers and so forth. At least that's what I interpreted that to be. We had nobody to guide us. We just went through there, as I said. And on the other side of that was barbed wires, and then the entrance from the back was guarded by two guardhouses on each side of the road so that -- separating it from the camp proper. Later I found out that the camp was sectioned into three different sections. They had the small camp, the large camp, and then they had the tent camp they called it. And that was put up later on for the Polish people when Germany started sending the Polish people into the concentration camps. Then the administrating building, as I said, was the one we went through. And the SS troopers had their barracks there on the right side. And they had the ammunition factories, which I didn't see. I think they were back in the woods somewhere.

Q: What were your thoughts as you were walking through?

A: Like walking through a different world. Not used to the tragedies that occurred there. The pictures of the -- they had these dummies at the entrance showing how they were whipped or clubbed -- actually, it was a club. They had another one hanging from a limb, which represented hanging from the trees. And then they had, of course, the furnaces. You could see those. Great big stacks, white stacks, back there that you could see the furnaces. Now I'm trying just to think if there's anything that I can think of --

Q: Well, then you were moving along --

A: Then we saw the piles of bodies next to the buildings, some of the buildings, of these skeletons of the bodies. And the expressions on their faces -- what were faces -- were that of horror. You could just read probably the pain and agony they must have gone in before they died. The stories that go along with that is that they would be told to go into this building. And as they would turn the corner to the stairs leading down to the basement where the furnaces were, they would be clubbed on the head until they were supposed to be unconscious. And then they'd roll down the stairs and eventually be put into the furnaces. If I remember right, there's about maybe 10 or 12 furnaces in a row lined up in the basement with each door in the front. That was at that time I went in they were still warm. And some of the doors were open, and you could see the remains of the body. What had happened is on April the 5th the order came down to the SS troopers that they were to evacuate all Jews to Auschwitz. They were trying to clean up the evidence that might be left behind when the Americans came through. That was the impression I had, and I think that was probably a fact. So that the next day they started evacuating all the Jews from all the camps. And then

later on when I got back to the States, I was interested enough to look up some of the history that was in the books. In fact, just more recent than that. And I found out the reason for what was happening and how it happened. The underground was sabotaging the orders so that slowing down the evacuation of the people that were to be evacuated. And it figures in one of the write-ups, recent write-ups, there was about 25,150 people evacuated in that time that met the death penalty. If they were evacuated to Auschwitz, that was noted to be the entry for the termination which Hitler called the final answer to their problem.

Q: Can you describe the crematorium in more detail?

A: Yes. As I said, the doors of -- several of them were still open, and the crematorium if you call it a crematorium -- I think it was just a murder box -- the entrance would be large enough to take a body and slide it all the way into the flames. The heat was generated by coal or so below. That was my impression. And the remains that were still in there were those that they didn't have a chance to finish. In fact, the bodies we saw outside were left there only because time did not permit them to put them in the furnaces. One of the prisoners said that the furnaces were running day and night for almost a week before I was there.

Q: When you went down into the crematorium, did you go with some prisoners who explained anything to you?

A: Only the question of how they would lead these men into the crematorium. And that was -- really that was gotten out -- down in the crematorium there was nobody there but myself and my driver. We were alone down there, and I took these pictures, which we may show, showing the crematoriums. When we were down there, there was nobody there with us. So the conversation about what was happening I got after I left the crematorium and was back on the road and talked to some of the prisoners about it.

Q: What did the crematorium look like from the outside?

A: My impression, if I can recall in going back years, was a white building. It looked like a house really. A white building. And all I could see in my mind is the one side of it because I took the picture that I did at that time from that side. It was well painted. It looked like a very pleasant house. I understand the first floor also had the furnace -- not the furnaces -- but the boxes to put them in. The crematorium. Both floors were crematoriums.

Q: When you went in, did you know what you'd be seeing?

A: I didn't know what I was going to see, no. I just followed the course of -- the man told you, "Go in there, and go right down the stairs." I don't even know who told me that, but it was obvious that's what I did. The stair was at the end. Then you'd walk down. Then the crematorium was immediately -- if you turned right, it was right in front of you. The face of the opening were toward the side that you came down. The back was that way. At the time we went down there, the floors were clean and everything. They had cleaned up a lot, but I

understand it was quite a messy place before. That's all I can remember.

Q: When you came out of the crematorium, then where did you go?

A: When I came out of the crematorium, I continued my walk, which took us down toward the place where the better homes were. We didn't go in any of them, but we saw them from the outside where probably the doctors or the officers would stay. And that took in the whole camp. The administrating compound is what I -- two or three streets down and blocked off by another street going to the left with the barracks with the SS troopers on this side and the barracks on the other side and the wired fences where they put the prisoners when they first came in for registration to the camp.

Q: Did you talk to any of the prisoners while you were walking around?

A: Not while walking. But I would stop and start a conversation at the time, and during that time they would mention some of the things that happened to the prisoners such as that when they were strapped, there wasn't only -- not strapped but when they were hit with these blows with this -- it was about a two-inch round bat if you'd call it. And it looked like it was displaying from a tree limb or so because you could still see where places from the limbs of the tree would come out. It would be jagged. It wouldn't be smooth. They would say they would hit those people and sometimes let them stay there for a day or so just so other prisoners would see them. And by the end of the day that person was swollen up and disfigured tremendously, and many of them wouldn't even get off there alive. Stringing up was done the same way. They strung them up in a fashion where their hands were tied up behind them and their head was dropped down so that as a medical man you wondered how the person could survive just in breathing with the weight of the head down. Again, they would be swollen up laying in the sun for a day or so before they took them down. And those are the stories that fed back. The impression was my own as to medically what would happen with the person in that position. It was a very uncomfortable position to be in. It in itself would eventually lend itself to death instead of just hanging by the neck, which is quick.

Q: Did you feel the need to render any medical assistance to any of the prisoners?

A: No, no. We -- at the time absolutely not. We couldn't interfere into that. What we did do is we came -- we -- when I say "we," what I did and probably other doctors -- before I left the camp, the camp started filling up with other doctors or GI's coming into the camp, and the MP's were at the gates, started to be at the gates. So I got in just ahead of that. At that time they were instructing the soldiers not to give them any of our K-ration -- which is that sweet candy bar that the soldiers would carry around in case they were on the battlefield and they needed some food. It was 100 percent energy -- with the idea that if you gave them that, they probably would die because it was too rich. And this is something we found out in the hospital when the post was done on some of these prisoners that we even received back from our own men that were captured only for two and a half months. Their stomachs started to

shrink down. And instead of being a typical stomach, it shrunk down to a small -- almost to a tube-like effect, which is interesting to know because I never knew it before I saw it there that the stomach will shrink down.

Q: Besides not giving them food, did you have the urge to help any of them medically?

A: That was done by another group. We were behind the Army, third Army, and our job was to follow the third Army. We were the hospital that took care of all the casualties behind Blood and Guts, which you know as General Patton. And our job -- we had to move with them. And General Patton stopped for nothing. His idea was to go across the continent and get the Germans off into little pockets and let the infantry come back and clean them up. And that's what we were. We only saw very little of anybody from Buchenwald. We saw more from the people of Weidar who were unfortunate enough to get involved with some of the prisoners when they were let free and were beaten up. In some cases a couple of them were hung by trees.

Q: Towards the end of the time you were in the camp, did the U.S. Army medical personnel come in?

A: They came in. There was another unit that took care of it. It wasn't us. That's all I know about that because we had to move on.

Q: What else did you see that first time in the camp? Anything else?

A: Okay. I'm trying to think of -- I saw -- in one case I saw -- one of the prisoners was digging on the ground with a little tiny ax or so, and I couldn't understand what he was digging a hole for. And I asked -- the prisoner came by, and he said, oh, he's burying his food. He said they bury the food, and then they felt that we wouldn't be there long. They wanted to have some food after we left. And this came right from the soldier. So he must have had a fact because I couldn't understand why he was doing it at the time. But I think one of the methods of destroying the prisoners was a planned diet that gradually resulted in malnutrition, and the people really just died from lack of food over a period of several months, which gave -- the Jewish prisoners when they first came in were assigned to the factories to work or to the -- they had a stone mine there that they were digging from. Stones and so forth. They were getting labor done cheap by putting these Jews and prisoners to work in their ammunition factories and so forth. But along with that I think was this constant planned reduction diet, which ended up in these people dying or getting weak enough so they couldn't work, and then they were put into these -- and this is my own impression I had when I left the camp -- they were eventually put into one of these three buildings there just to be there and die and be burned through the furnaces.

Q: What were some of the other conversations you had with the prisoners while you were there?

A: That's about all. They wouldn't talk, most of them. They didn't go out of their way to talk. If

you talked to them, they would respond. That's how I got the answers I did. One other thing is they mentioned that when they would beat these soldiers -- or these prisoners -- or hung them up, they would strip them down nude. If you look at the bodies that you'll see in these piles, you would see the black and blue marks of bruises on what was left of the skin and so forth. And I mentioned about the expressions. And also that the bodies -- if you look at them, you think they all reached the same stage before they died because they all looked so similar in the amount of malnutrition that you see. And I've seen many people in the hospital that would take them quite a while to reach that stage of malnutrition. So they weren't killed instantly. They were dragged on until they were weak enough that they couldn't do anything. And then they'd get diseases, and many of them would commit suicide by themselves, and many of them would die from diseases and malnutrition.

Q: Did you know anything about any of the medical experiments that were performed in Buchenwald?

A: Yes. They were using medical experiments, and the medical experiments they were using was, one, to study the effect of amputations and how to handle them. And I'll tell you a little bit about that in a minute. The other thing was giving them poisons in trying the strengths of the different poisons on people. And the other thing was using toxins that would irritate the skin like some of our gases do that we were using -- not we were using but the armies use sometimes in wars. Those are the three or four elements that they were -- some of them. And I also understand they were experimenting a lot on birth control.

Q: What's that?

A: Sterilization. You see, the impression I received -- and this, again, was borne out later on -- they at first wanted the Jews to leave Germany, and they did everything to encourage them to leave. And then eventually in '41 I think -- 11th of '41 or thereabouts -- Hitler decided to kill -- take the final solution. And that was his order. And then Auschwitz was one of the places that used gas. They used cyanide gas or carbon monoxide.

Q: You said they were doing experiments on amputation? Tell us about that.

A: Well, I could see why. I'm just associating what I saw and what I'm putting together. When we came across Brest and we emptied their hospitals -- which as we took over, we took over hospitals. And then the responsibility was ours to take care of their people. And we had probably a football field full with many of the people -- most of the people had amputations. And we stacked it up at that time to the fact that we had Penicillin, and the Germans only had Sulpha at that time as a drug. Sulfanilamide. And Sulfanilamide, of course, wasn't as effective as Penicillin was. At the time of war you've got to get these people off the battlefield as fast as you can because infection sets in almost immediate when they hit the ground. In Europe the people used the ground to defecate on and everything else. They called this fertilizing it. So you couldn't trust the ground of being clean of bacteria and so forth so that it was necessary to do something. And the quickest way to prevent infection is

to cut off the arm, cut off the leg to prevent it.

Q: Let's go back to your visit. Towards the end of your visit, you said more American soldiers and doctors came in. What did you say to them?

A: We didn't say a word. They were just as much surprised at what they saw as I was when I came in. There was nothing to say. It was so terrible a thing to see masses of people with expressions of agony. You just got the impression of what it was just by looking. There was nothing to say. What can you say? You feel depressed. You walk away, and you are convinced -- in fact, you go away with the idea it can't be so. It's hard to believe and realize what you have seen. And this is my impression. In fact, even when I came back to the States, I wouldn't talk of it for the same reason. I couldn't think that -- maybe I had a dream because the things that you see is so different than human beings are supposed to behave. And people -- you look at them and say they wouldn't believe it anyway. And I think a lot of our soldiers did that. They wanted to forget the horrors of war. And they'll tell you more about the comedy of war, what happens that's a little bit amusing.

Q: How long were you in the camp at that visit?

A: The camp Buchenwald?

Q: How many hours were you there?

A: About three hours. Three to four hours.

Q: And then you left with your driver?

A: I left and went back to the unit.

Q: Did you report what you saw to anybody?

A: I told the officers where we stayed what I saw. And within the next day or so, the colonel gave permission for the nurses and so forth to have a vehicle so they could go and see it too. And the girls would go off five at a time or so and go down in there and go through the camp too. As I said, Eisenhower dictated that the people of the city will be taken in there, and they made everybody in the city go through the camp to see what the Germans were doing because they kept on saying they didn't know anything about it. And that's about all of the things that I can remember. And, as I say, a lot of things probably I saw I don't remember because I blocked them out.

Q: As you say, when you left, you saw other American soldiers coming in?

A: When I left, there were other soldiers in the camp that weren't there when I first went in.

Q: But you did not speak to them?

A: No. I mean, it's like going out of the funeral home. You didn't look for conversation yourself. You're depressed and feeling alone. You just want to -- you're lost in your own feelings. You don't feel like talking. If anything, you get a lump in your throat. You're very depressed. It leaves you not only depressed, but you have nightmares for a few days after about that. Especially the one where I told you where I turned around and here was a skeleton talking to me. I'll never forget that. The skeleton that talked to me was exactly the same as the ones -- the piles of them. So what can you say? There are no words to express the tragedies of war. There are absolutely no words. I saw a lot of it right on the battlefield for that matter with dead soldiers all over the field and crazy things. You don't try to remember those things. It's not anything pleasant to see especially as a doctor where you'd like to give help and so forth, and there's nothing you can do. This is the after effect. And you walk away the same as any person. You walk away and say, "What's going to become of these people?" As it turned out, the people that were in the last two barracks that I mentioned probably died right there without going any further. Even though we'd do what we could for them, we couldn't do enough. When I say "we," I'm talking about the medical part of the Army. Not our unit but whoever took care of them. We got papers over there, newspapers, from the different units which would communicate back and forth and give us an idea of what we would be seeing so that we knew what was going on.

Q: We're going to have to stop the tape right at this moment.

A: Okay.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: They're just going to change the tape. Did you say you remembered another experience in Buchenwald?

A: Yes. I started to say something about that. One of the pictures I've taken -- Do you want me to go on?

Q: Yeah.

A: -- where these prisoners were lying in this room on big mattresses and also sleeping bags which we know weren't theirs and they probably got it from the SS troopers. But to them it was not like lying on the dirt and stuff in their own camp. They told us their places were terrible. Especially some of the prisoners got into very dirty areas where they would be sleeping and so forth. The sanitation of the camp was terrible back in the camps themselves, and that might not have been just at the very end stages. I don't know what it was when they were functioning. I don't think they could function in such a dirty place.

Q: You said you went back to your headquarters, and then how long did you stay there at that location?

A: Probably at the most a day or two. I think we moved. On the 14th or 15th I think we moved out of that place and then on to the next place, which was a city Wieden (phonetic) I think. Wieden or something like that. It was barracks there. There we stayed only three or four days and then went forward again.

Q: Did you encounter any other camps or detention places?

A: No. From there on we were too busy taking care of -- we didn't get anywhere. I mean I don't think we came near camps. We might have. It just happened that this one we happened to be the first group that was probably close enough to the camp to be affected by it.

Q: So then you just continued to move? What were your duties?

A: From there on we were just taking care of our soldiers and prisoners and so forth. But we were busy 12 hours a day. At least 12. And even then after that during the Bulge, most of us worked on 14, 15 hours. Incidentally, one of the prisoners mentioned that the Jews were given unusual cruelty -- they were very cruel treating the Jewish people there and that they would make them work in these quarries 15 and 16 and 20 hours. I don't know. They would make them work a long time. This was just mentioned. That's all. How it came up I don't know.

Q: This was told to you when you were in Buchenwald?

A: Did I what?

Q: This was told to you when you were in Buchenwald? What you just said about the treatment of the Jews.

A: Well, we -- I'm trying to figure out where I heard of that in general. I think we even got that before we got into the war. I think we got it in our own papers probably. And that might influence the impression and probably stimulated the question and probably all they were confirming what we probably already suspected.

Q: What was your itinerary for the rest of the war?

A: Well, we followed the German Army -- I mean the -- chasing the German Army across Europe. And then at Bastogne the Germ -- the counterattack and the Bulge -- you probably read about the Bulge. And we survived that. And then went on to Regensburg where the war ended, and that's where armistice was. From Regensburg we moved back into Wurzburg where we for the first time were able to get into a hospital and use the hospital of the Germans, which was well taken care of. It was a hospital with clean beds and everything else, and the instruments we used were most modern and everything. But that was after the war. Then from there on, of course, we waited for the time when we were to go out -- go back -- and many of us were scheduled to go to Japan at that time, and I was one of them. I was one of the younger officers. I'm not young now, but then I was. And finally Japan gave up before we were moved. So I got back into the States on New Year's 1946 and went back and continued my residency at the hospital that I was working before, Mount Carmen Mercy Hospital, (phonetic) and then got involved in industrial medicine and became the medical director of American Motors for 38 years.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about how the war, your experiences, affected you, your experience at Buchenwald affected you. Your thoughts as a medical professional.

A: You never used it. I never used it. In my experience that I had in the war doing almost around 3,000 operations, which many surgeons never see in a lifetime, the experience I obtained there was not recognized by the surgical specialty group. So we never used it. We just -- it's something you put aside. It worked out you learned a lot of things doing that type of surgery. It's traumatic surgery, and it came in useful when I got into industrial medicine. The knowledge that you obtain by experience is something greater than any book can learn you -- teach you. So that it was there, but you didn't recall it yourself. It just would pop up every now and then, something that you did before. But you never talked about the war. I never did. I'd be the last one to sit in a group -- and they'd be talking about different things -- to say anything about the war. To me it's like you pull a shade down and say that's part of the life you -- it isn't pleasant to remember. None of it. The tragedies in war are something you don't talk about. I don't think so. I wouldn't be talking here now if it wasn't for my darling daughter who insisted I -- and my nephew.

Q: What lasting effects do you think your experience at Buchenwald had on you emotionally, intellectually?

A: Well, did you ever see a movie that was very impressive and many years later you recall different incidents of what you've seen? That's the thing of it. You never forget about them. They're always in the back of your mind. The only thing is sometimes they're stimulated by something that happens. And you say, "Gee, I could remember this." But you don't dwell on it or go out and say, "Well, I think I'll talk to this and that party about the war and tell them all the things I did" because you can't believe half the stuff yourself. It's such an unreal experience to a person who goes through the war. People that talk the most are the ones who see the least because many of my doctor friends who were with me in the same unit -- we never discussed the war. We will discuss the comedy like you run into situations that you experienced during the war when you're visiting Paris or something like that, but you don't talk about death and murder and torture and the pain that -- it's amazing. I saw people walk into the hospital with both legs shot out from under them, but they were walking on the legs, and both the femurs were broken. I've seen fellows come in with a shell hole that went up the back, went through the tin and went around the protecting helmet and out. Miracles. You don't know -- the craziest things happen. So it becomes a world of thinking of reality and what doesn't seem so real.

Q: Did your experience at Buchenwald have a particular message to you?

A: Oh, yes. I sit down, and sometimes I get very, very mad of some person who tries to say that, oh, that didn't exist. But you don't try to correct them because they're too dumb to realize it. And besides it's hard for you to appreciate what you saw. It isn't appreciation, anyway, but it's just a feeling. There's no sense of talking about something that isn't pleasant to talk about. I think even talking here is not a -- I shouldn't say this, but I'll tell you the truth. It isn't anything pleasing to me. It's against what I usually do. I don't talk about it. In fact, I've had many people ask me about it, and I don't know anything about it. And that's my attitude. And as a corporate medical director of a large corporation, I don't think even half of them even knew I was in the war. Not half. I don't think any of them knew I was in the war. That's how much I talked about it. Even today I'm on the staff -- I was on the staff and still am on the staff -- but as an old man you have to retire a little bit. I don't think many of the doctors I associated with know my experiences because you don't talk about unpleasant things. You try to -- the mind blocks out. Thank God for that. And that's in real life too. The same way with people that have miserable deaths and so forth.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish?

A: No. But I'd like to add I think I've about out-talked myself. I appreciate your patience.

Q: Thank you very much on behalf of the museum.

A: When I leave, I have a choking feeling sometimes like now because it just leaves you that

way, depressed. That's it. (Commenting on the pictures)

- A: This was inside of one of the three barracks that I first saw and explained when I came into the camp. And what you see here is the loose squares that were made for three, four people to sleep in and ended up sometimes sleeping as many as twelve. And the fellows that are sitting on it are probably very new prisoners because they haven't lost any weight or they don't even look ragged. And you can see that's about what it shows.
- Q: Now they're going to put up another picture. Then when I tell you, just where it is, what it is.
- A: And keep it brief. Just to the point.
- Q: Can you see that?
- A: Yeah.
- Q: Will you describe to me --
- A: Is that a bunch of --
- Q: It's like an open area --
- A: And a bunch of men walking out in the middle of the street.
- Q: Just where it is, what it is. But wait until I tell you.
- A: That's a picture walking down the street in front of the administration compound. On the right side you see the barracks of the SS troopers. On the left is part of the administration building where the camp officials would stay. And people are just walking around there freely with no worry about being stopped. So they're all prisoners of war -- I mean prisoners.
- Q: Are their clothes hanging on a clothesline?
- A: Yes. That must have been quite a novelty for them to get some clean clothes. We don't know where they got it, but they got it in the picture there. I can't tell you how they got it except that I think what they did is get it out of the SS troopers' barracks.
- Q: Now they're going to put up another picture. Can you see that?
- A: Yeah. You can look at this picture, and you'll see --
- Q: Wait. You're able to see that?
- A: It's okay. I can see.

Q: Where it is, what it is -- wait a minute. Okay.

A: This is a picture of a man, one of the prisoners, holding up a specimen bottle that has three strips of tattoo, the skin that was cut off the bodies of the prisoners that gave their life for that practically. And these are the type things that they would sew into the lamps that they were making as part of the lamp, the top part. There were many lamps made.

Q: They're going to change. Do you recognize that?

A: Yes. If you look closely here, you'll see a man digging on the right -- is that right? Do you see it?

Q: Yes.

A: -- with an ax. And on the left is a barbed-wire fence where the people when they were brought in from the trains and the train tracks and everything were back in the camp, they were put in these cages for a while until they were given where they're supposed to go. Questioning why that man was digging, the answer I got was that he was just burying food because they didn't believe that the Americans were going to be there very long and the Germans would be back.

Q: We're going to put a fresh picture there. Can you see that?

A: Yes. This is --

Q: Wait, wait, wait.

A: Oh, I'm sorry.

Q: You're able to see that?

A: Yes. This is a picture of the crematorium. And if you look closely, you'll notice that there are bones within the opening of the crematorium. I estimated that there were 12 of these crematoriums right next to each other, and three or four of them had their doors open, and each one of them showed a similar picture that you're seeing here. These are the remains of people who have been cremated. (New picture)

A: That's a picture of the same thing?

Q: It's another angle. It's open doors.

A: This is another view of several other crematoriums. If you look back down if you can, it fades out, but you could see the doors open and two or three of them behind that. When I

was down there, it was still warm, and they were open to cool off. And there's bones in every one of those representing the remains. (New picture)

A: Can you tell me what I'm looking at?

Q: Well, he's going to enlarge it. I'm not quite sure yet.

A: Can I talk to you?

Q: Yeah.

A: If you'd just give me a little of a hint of what I'm looking at.

Q: You won't be asked to go until you're sure of what it is. He's trying to adjust.

A: I studied these, but I have to recall what I saw under the magnification I used.

Q: This is one of these smaller photographs that you brought in, and he's going to try and focus it. You won't have to explain it until --

A: You give me a little hint as to what you see.

Q: I'm not quite sure. I think I see a Jeep.

A: A front door where a bunch of people are coming in and a Jeep on the right side?

Q: There's a Jeep on the right. Do you know what this is?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: This is a picture of the entrance to the camp from the front to the back. If the prisoners were coming back in the camp later in the afternoon, most of them would go out of the camp, walk around and come back. I just happened to come in and see this when they were coming back into the camp. I think they were all facing this way. And if you look in the picture, you'll see that one of them showed an MP in there. So it was later in the day when the MP started to take over, "MP" being a military policeman of the Army.

Q: They're going to put in another picture. Okay. This is another one of the smaller pictures.

A: A bunch of men together walking?

Q: They're pushing like a wagon.

A: Okay.

Q: Do you remember what this is?

A: This is a picture of a group of men pushing a cart, and on the cart, if you could see, there is -- it looks like a large garbage pail, five-gallon garbage pail, but that's what they used to make their soup in. And this is lunchtime, and they were pushing it down by the administration compound buildings where the prisoners would come up and get a bowl of soup or so. Could I talk to you? Actually, it's not a garbage pail. It's a 25- or 50-gallon -- it looks like a big garbage pail, but they used it to put the soup in.

Q: We just wanted to thank you again for coming and doing this and tell you how much we appreciate it.

End of Tape #2

Conclusion of Interview