

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Arthur Gifford-England

July 10, 2012

RG-50.030*0710

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Arthur Gifford-England, conducted by Duncan Little on July 10, 2012 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview 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 reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

ARTHUR GIFFORD-ENGLAND

October 29, 2009

Interview: Arthur Gifford-England (AG). POW at E715 Auschwitz.

Date: 10 July 2012

Interviewer: Duncan Little (DL)

Camera time code start: 03(h):36(m):23(s)

Transcript timecode start: 00(h):00(m):00(s)

[DL] - Duncan Little
[AG] – Arthur Gifford-England

[00:00:00]

[DL] Arthur I'm going to interrupt you because we're ready to start now

[AG] Alright, go on

[DL] I'm going to start off by...

[Clap] at 00(h):00(m):11(s)

[DL] Excellent.

Okay if I could, er; start off by taking your name, if you could say who you are please

[AG] Arthur Henry Gifford-England.

[DL] Okay Arthur and how do we spell both your er, both your surnames; Gifford England?

[AG] G, I, double F, O, R, D, hyphenated, England

[DL] Okay, and er Arthur, A, R, T, (U), T, H, U, R

[AG] Yeah

[DL] Chris, is the reflection on Arthur's glasses a problem?

Arthur, when were you actually born?

[AG] The first of August 1919, er that's right 1919

[DL] And whereabouts were you born?

[AG] Kingston St Mary, near Taunton

[DL] And what did you initially study, erm, and when, and why did you actually join the Army?

[AG] Pardon?

[DL] What would, did you initially study? What was er, your chosen profession?

[AG] Well, I, left school, and I got an apprenticeship as a carpenter and joiner, down at the Windsor Hill, a little, er; a little...called Jim Seer.

[DL] And when the war actually broke out...

[AG] Yeah...

[DL] Where were you, and what actually happened?

[AG] Windsor Hill, I was going, when war broke out, I'd passed all my exams for the force, Police force, and er, I was, from the day war broke out, they were going to call me the following Wednesday, but they were stopped.

[DL] And, er why did you actually join the Army?

[AG] Well... had to, had to join the Army, and everyone used to say when they, everybody, twenty had to join the Army, war or no, conscription

[DL] But why did you join the Army itself as opposed to Navy or the Air Force?

[AG] Well, I joined in Army, in preference to the Navy, because my mother said to me "don't join the Navy, I've lost too many relatives in Navy", and the RAF I never bothered with it

[DL] So your initial training, where about was your initial training?

[AG] Aldershot

[DL] And what happened when you completed your initial training?

[AG] I joined a 106 Army troops for engineers

[DL] Er, where about were you deployed?

[AG] I joined them at Leeds.

[DL] And in terms of where you were actually sent, where did they send you?

[AG] They sent me to Leeds from Aldershot, then we went to various places in England, finished up at Stonehaven, from Stonehaven, we got on an Empress at Canada, went to Egypt

[DL] And when-a-bouts would you say you were sent to Egypt?

[AG] We set, well, we, Portside, we got off, we, we disembarked then we went up, we went straight up the desert

[DL] And when was this? What year?

[AG] Oh God, now you got me now, a minute, 19... Early 1942

[DL] 1942? Okay and what actually happened to you when you were fighting in Egypt?

[AG] Well we were a company on water supply, and we were maintaining the water supply, and digging out what was called a 'beers', that the Romans had dug, to store corn in, cause they filled up with ha... and we was out out out in the wilds, finding these places, we then went to Tobruk,

[00:05:00]

[AG] and the company, was split up into sections, there doing various water supply jobs. And I was was, my, my er, section was looking after an Italian made pumping station, and I sent out to look after a reservoir, on me own, and one morning the, it was miles away from anywhere and some officers came on, and an English officer in, he, in South African Army, said to me "could I blow the reservoir?" Well everything was there except the detonators, and I told him I wanted dets, he got them up for me, with a, er, South African sergeant, and we made it blowable.

And then, a couple or three days later, Jerry made a big push, I'd got told to blow the reservoir, and when I got outside, and there was a Major there, old gentleman crying his eyes out, an English one in the South African Army, and he said to me "I would never have believed it, look down there", and somebody had a white flag up. Anyway, I was living in a little foxhole myself, I went, he gives me this, South African [LAUGHS] gave me a, bottle of South African brandy. So I was sozzled actually when I got to prisoner, but he come out and, er [LAUGHS], there was a big tank there with a officer wiggling a forty-five around "come mate" – I said "yes I'm coming mate", and if went down into brook and joined the column

[DL] So that's when you were...

[AG] Yeah

[DL] ... captured by the Germans? And what happened to you once you had been captured by the Germans?

[AG] We marched a long way and we got into Bengasi, and in the Bengasi..., sure handed, as old as the Italians, and we were put in cages, in big compounds, and the, er, Sansui tribe, was firing at us.

[DL] This is when you're still in, in Africa?

[AG] Yeah, and this was Bengasi, and anyway we had the barest rations, and er, well we didn't have any rations, and er, the water we had, you had to put your hand out through the wire, and you know, so drink, anyway, the Sansui were sh...sh...shooting at us, trying to stop us. From there they shipped us over to, lord, Italy, I forget where it was we landed, and when we landed, the old people, pretty near the sea we landed, the old people were crying, and the youngsters were throwing stones at us. Anyway we got put in huts, for a while. And er, didn't have anything to do, then all of a sudden, they just shift us out in tents

[DL] And whereabouts in Italy was this?

[AG] In Italy, I'll tell ye in a minute. Erm, oh god, I should think I went, a minute, anyway, we were in tents, on a side of a hill, which gradually became a mud heap, and er was there one day, and everybody it was, when the er,

[00:10:00]

[AG] Allies had landed in Italy, we, instead of being told to get out and find them, we were told to stay, but that gave the gentlemen time to round us all up. We were put on trains and shifted into Germany. At a place called Lamsdorf, which actually I think, is in Poland. Well from there which was a huge camp we was moved out to Auschwitz.

[DL] Before you went to Auschwitz, and you were sent in trucks to Lamsdorf, when was this? Do you remember roughly which year, which month it was?

[AG] Oh, 19, end of 1942 I think

[DL] So it was 1942 you were sent from...

[AG] Yeah

[DL] ...erm, from Italy to Germany...

[AG] Yeah, it was

[DL] ...and what were conditions like for the duration of your transport to Germany?

[AG] Oh like cattle trucks. Cattle trucks, I don't know how many men was in there but er, the only food the Italians give us was a tin of so called corned beef, which we were told was made of donkeys [LAUGHS], and er, er, thing a bread all the time, we was travelling all the time in the trucks.

[DL] And how long did the journey last for?

[AG] I think it was about a week if that's right with my memory

[DL] And were there any stops on the journey?

[AG] We had to go up through Brenner Pass, so that way. And er, all the stops and starts as the Air Force came over like

[DL] But did they actually stop and allow you out of the trucks?

[AG] No.

[DL] And were there and stops in terms of replenishing water or supplies...?

[AG] No no no, no.

[DL] How did you, in terms of water, how did you actually survive, did you have any water?

[AG] Luck [LAUGHS], luck and well, we were doing our damndest to upset the Jerry actually. But we didn't, we didn't upset...we got to Lamsdorf. So right, that was a huge camp that was the central camp in Poland where they sent out the work parties to Auschwitz and various other places.

[DL] And how were the cattle trucks to Auschwitz, what were conditions like for you in those trucks?

[AG] Same. Cattle trucks. I can remember passing a label with Auschwitz on, and of course we never knew what it was, never knew what was happening, and just after Auschwitz, we stopped, and we got out, the, this was about midnight, and we marched down to a brand new camp, hutted camp. So thought this is going to be alright. Well about three weeks later we all got moved out of the camp to nearer the factory that was, what was being built. And then they put us in huts what was alright, they were alright there was nothing wrong with them

[DL] And when you arrived at Auschwitz, what was your recollections when you actually arrived, when the cattle trucks came into Auschwitz?

[AG] Well we didn't see Auschwitz cause we was held in the camp they give us, for about three weeks, we didn't see nothing happening until we got up by the wire on this big factory. And then we saw the Jews and everything else, what was happening

[DL] And that's IG Farben

[AG] Yeah

[DL] And what did you witness when you got, when you got up towards IG Farben?

[AG] Well we were watching these, couldn't hardly believe it, all these poor people in what we used to call pyjama suits, and the way the Germans were treating them. To the Germans

[00:15:00]

[AG] they were just dirt, they...if the German wanted to kill one he would, [COUGH], and they were split up into parties, and each party had a chap on, which was also a Jew, and if they thought the gang wasn't working hard enough he thrashed him. [COUGH], excuse me, erm, and er we couldn't make it out to see Jews at times killing Jews. So if they didn't work hard enough, they were thrashed and I seem them killed. And they were left. They were picked up at night, taken back, put in the boiler.

[DL] Sorry they were taken back and put where?

[AG] They were put in the actual Auschwitz, German, German Auschwitz, and er, they er, sometimes you saw, but as regards to Jerry in our camp, he was mainly the older generation of Jerries that had fought at the end of the 1914 1918 war

[DL] You're talking about your guards...

[AG] Yeah

[DL] ...so the men who guarded you?

[AG] Our guards. You had, there was some, well the Jews had SS guards, and they would try to intimidate us but they couldn't

[DL] The SS would try to intimidate you?

[AG] They had a, we did have one boy shot. He was in the, when we had to go in the factories to work in small parties, he was one of a small party, that was painting pylons. You know, pylons, and he couldn't go up, which is feasible. He was a minor. He told the Jerry, the Jerry man the gaffer I think was there, he said "I can't go up". Well there was an SS bloke there, and this SS bloke, oh yes he's got to go up, he's got to go up and all this, and he turned around and shot. Immediately we were all taken back into the camp. Everybody.

[DL] And you witnessed the shooting of Corporate Reynolds?

[AG] Pardon?

[DL] Did you witness yourself?

[AG] No, no no I didn't, that er that was the old in case of nine all, it was happened there, but in the end if an SS came round the corner, and we were there, he turned his back and went back where he come from

[DL] Why did he do that?

[AG] Cause he know damned well we should get him if we wanted to

[DL] And were there cases where British...

[AG] Jerry put a, in our camp, the Jerry put a spy in our camp, we found out. He was disposed of, and Jerry never put another one in there

[DL] So what actually happened to this man? How did you know or why did you suspect that he wasn't what he said he was?

[AG] Well, they found out he was supposed to be in the Yorkshire Yeomanry unit, he had the badges and all of it, but how they found out I don't know. But when they found out, he wasn't no more. I don't, I know where he was but I'm not saying.

[00:20:00]

[AG] But with that, the SS and that, was looked very careful what they done to us.

[DL] And in terms of other resistance, or passive resistance or sabotage...

[AG] O yeah they, when, I think it was the Canadians, they, they, er put a boat on shore and blew them up on the coast, or anyway, Jerry said, to, we put some of their men in iron, in chains you know, and they had the bright idea of putting our hands in rope. So we had to line up, and they tied around the rope with string, and while they were doing that, the one he done before went to the back of the queue, and took off, took off the string, and they were going round in circles, like this. And in the end, Jerry he got fed up with it, he didn't bother no more

[DL] So this was a punishment in retaliation to what the Allies had done during the war

[AG] Yeah, yer...

[DL] And, and this was just a random punishment...

[AG] Yeah

[DL] ...without purpose?

[AG] That's right

[DL] And other acts of sabotage that happened – what other acts of...?

[AG] Oh, er when one was walking about the factory, it was also a railway, parcelling yard. You change the tickets on the trucks, on the trains that were made up, so perhaps the Russians that were waiting for ammunition, all they got were loads of paint. Take one card out and swap them all over

[DL] You mean the Germans on the Russian front if they were waiting for ammunition...

[AG] Yeah, yeah we used to swap them over. Swap the cards over no matter where it was, take that card and put it on another train see

[DL] So the train would then change direction, and end up at the Russian front with paint instead of bullets?

[AG] That's right. Then one day, two boys had a bright idea, they were railway engineers, they pinched a train, pinched an engine. Went for a ride, Jerry didn't know where his engine was till it came back down the line ooh...ohhh..oooh! [LAUGHS], small stuff

[DL] Weren't they afraid? When I was speaking with Ron Jones he mentioned that there was fear, or at least fear for him of the gas chambers. Was there a fear for other men as well that such acts of defiance...

[AG] No

[DL] ...could result in...

[AG] No they didn't do, we had no fear of the gas chambers at all. Only punishment we got here was put in the cooler for perhaps two days or three days – that was all.

[DL] Did you ever end up in the cooler?

[AG] No

[DL] And when did you actually find out about the gas chambers?

[AG] Well, we found out within about two days of being there, cause you could smell it, you could smell it in the air. And the Jews that we managed to talk to told us, cause if they were caught talking to us, that was the end of them. That's the end of them, they went back to their camp, and murdered.

[DL] So did you talk to any of the Jews, or did you manage to talk to any of the Jews, or communicate with them?

[AG] Well, you could, but you had to be very careful, you had to be very careful because of the SS saw you talking to them they tried to wallop, they'd kill the Jew

[DL] In front of you?

[AG] In front of us

[DL] So when you were working at the IG Farben factory,

[00:25:00]

[DL] how many people would you see, would you say on a day to day basis did you see being murdered?

[AG] Oh I expect to see two or three at least

[DL] And for what reason

[AG] Just because the Germans didn't like them. And the Capos, they got a bit more to eat than the others, what it amounted to

[DL] What happened to you at the IG Farben factory? – You became injured?

[AG] Yes, I got these fingers squashed loading pipes

[DL] And so what, what did you do when you were injured, how did you...

[AG] I went back to the camp hospital, cause we had a doctor, and he got them right, then I stopped in the camp then for a few months, but it was the doctor that'd keep that hospital full, if you understand what I mean. You only have to have a cold oh, you went in hospital. You wasn't working for the Jerry, then Jerry, er um, have a blitz, and kick you all out of the hospital, and by the next morning, you're all back in again

[DL] What were conditions like in the hospital?

[AG] Pardon?

[DL] What were conditions like in your hospital?

[AG] Good, good, got nothing to grumble about

[DL] And when you were convalescing from your injury, you made a garden?

[AG] No, er yeah I had a garden

[DL] So could you talk a little about the garden which you made?

[AG] Yeah well that was funny, I was there one day, and I got myself, found a spade, find out what the soil was like you know, so I made a little garden between us and er, I asked permission from Charlie Coward, the camp, camp officer, and he said yeah, and then I got some tomato plants, he got me some tomato plants cause he was, what they called a man of confidence, he was allowed to go to Auschwitz to, and pick up the mail and things like that, and er, I give him a bar of chocolate, and he gives us a dozen tomato plans, quite lovely. Then of course, this Saturday night we gave a concert, as we used to do things like that in the camp, and er, we're clearing Sunday morning, we were, we had the stage and that outside, it was clear that way, and the Yanks come over bombing. I went into my little foxhole, and er, I didn't like the Jerry shelter, of course one came down, hit the end of the shelter, ah let's see what, how many was killed there, well I know there was twenty odd, killed there. I got out of my little hole, went down there, and the first bloke I pulled out was my friend. I was still there working, and the doctor said "you want my tea", "I'm alright" I said, and he said "you want my tea", and that's an order. So after things quietened down and that, I said, why did you order me up there, and he said "If you hadn't have pulled a friend out, you'd have been alright, because I'd seen it in your eyes you'd be the next one to go down

[DL] To go down?

[AG] To go down on the floor you know? Faint, pass out

[DL] Was that because you'd been injured by the blast?

[AG] No, it's because I'd pulled my mate out first – if I didn't know the bloke it wouldn't have affected me.

[00:30:00]

[DL] When you'd had your garden, before it was destroyed, what did you witness, erm from the nearby concentration camp, how close were you to, to the concentration camp?

[AG] Well actually, we were about, I should suppose, about a quarter mile, it was, seeing the, maps, I had the maps of them but I've lost them, we was about a quarter of a mile. We were next door to the boundary, the boundary wire of the factory, there's only road between us, but the actual, I suppose about a quarter of a mile away from us.

[DL] And, when you were working on your garden, did you witness atrocities at that point as well?

[AG] No, I couldn't because I was in between huts.

[DL] The radio set in the British camp, er, how did that actually work?

[AG] Don't ask me cause nobody knows, they were working it

[DL] And what about, we've touched on some of the sabotage acts which were carried out, erm, were there other sabotage acts in terms of what, what was the mantra, the British mantra in IG Farben?

[AG] No, everything was done, how can I put, sort of automatic, you were going to help the Jerries as hard as you could

[DL] And what did you do to try to help the Jews in terms of...

[AG] If we could, used to pass them food, what we could spare, pass them bits... But, that's all we could do

[DL] And how many Jewish people, how many concentration camp victims would you estimate were working at IG Farben at that point?

[AG] I should, I should imagine there be a couple of thousand. Cause it was a huge place. It were going to be fifteen square mile when it were finished

[DL] And the number of British POWs there?

[AG] About six hundred

[DL] And you were witnessing everyday what was happening?

[AG] Oh yes

[DL] And what was the average day like for yourself at IG Farben?

[AG] Well you were stood up to, and nothing to the Jerry [COUGH / LAUGH], you didn't work if you didn't want to, but if a Jerry come along he see you be doing

something even if you be doing nothing. They put, our boys dug a trench, and they put a big cable in there, electric cable [LAUGHS], but while they were doing it, the pick axes slipped, went through this cable two or three times, come to some big top notch Jerry, so he pulls the handle down and nothing happens [LAUGHS], that's the sort of thing we was doing

[DL] In terms of away from the factory, erm, what sort of entertainment did you out on? You touched upon the stage plays earlier...

[AG] Yeah we had stage plays, had erm, a little sort of jazz band effort there you know cause there wasn't very much else there you see, play cards, talking amongst yourselves

[DL] Did you ever discuss what was happening with the Jews?

[AG] Oh yeah, yeah

[DL] And what did you, when you discussed what was happening to the Jews, what was the discussion?

[AG] well the discussion was seeing and talking if there was a way we could help any of them, you see, actually, I don't think, anybody tried to get out from ours where we were, because it was in the middle of a swamp, our camp.

[00:35:00]

[AG] And without you know the roads you lose yourself

[DL] You took part in stage plays with POWs who were in Sweeny Todd alongside Ron Jones. What are your recollections of those shows, and rehearsals leading up to...

[AG] Fun, fun. It was awful fun. When we actually put the play on, Jerry always put a man in the hut, and he was in the centre seat in front the stage. We weren't allowed to sing God save the King, so we sang the Land of Hope and Glory. But when we stood up, we made sure that bloody Jerry stood up with us, we squashed him till he stood up

[DL] And that German was a censor?

[AG] He was an, he was an armoured Jerry, sergeants see that we didn't make fun of Adolf Hitler. Another what used to happen, they used to give us pep talks, all lined up and this little Jerry officer, he about four foot six, he come in, strutting in all his lot, and he'd start "we sunk four of your battleships yesterday - hooray", cause they cheered like that, and in the end, you've heard of man jumping, jumping with rage, I seen him actually jumping up and down. You take no notice of them, cause we had a rough idea of what was happening with the couple of radios we had in there see

[DL] Was this man an SS officer or was he...

[AG] He was a normal German officer, cause when our boys landed in France, Jerry used to put on a 'music while you work on' in hospital you know, you used to have music while you were working in the hospital, and they forgot to switch it off, and

they said "the allies have landed on the coasts this morning. In France we have resisted it". We all, they called us all in, in the camp, house had the biggest bonfire of their life when that happened [LAUGHS]

[DL] And this was just in the hospital where the music was played?

[AG] Yeah

[DL] And this was just in the British POW hospital?

[AG] Yeah

[DL] And how many people would you say roughly worked in that hospital, or were patients in that hospital at any one time?

[AG] Well it varied, it could be a dozen patients in there all the time, and half a dozen helping I suppose

[DL] In terms of just going back to to to what was going on around you with the Jews, what's your, looking back on it now, what's your recollection? What stands in your memory now as to the treatment which you witnessed at that point in your life?

[AG] what was, what stands in my life was the dead, the dead left out in the factory after the bombing. You see this big factory had concrete cellars and things like that, you know, and when the bombing come, the Jews went in there, and they were left when the bombs hit them, left there for a couple of days

[DL] And how many roughly would you say were in the cellars?

[AG] I couldn't tell ye I don't know

[DL] At the start of 1945, you were, you were ordered to leave the camp...

[AG] Yep

[DL] ...what was your memory of the walk from Auschwitz?

[AG] Bloody cold [LAUGHS], and a lack of food, they never fed us if they couldn't

[00:40:00]

[DL] And what did you see on, on the march as you walked away from Auschwitz?

[AG] A lot of dead Jews beside the road, cause they marched out before us, some of them

[DL] And what happened to you during the course of the march?

[AG] Well personally, myself, during the march I went down with, I didn't know it at the time, with pneumonia, but there was two dentists, dentist officers, there was six of us put in a big mansion, and they were given, Jerry give them some pills, I don't know what they were. Anyway can't remember that bit all that much, but they saved us, saved our lives. And from then, they put us on a train to Pilsen, and I've never moved on a train so fast in all my life. Was in Pilsen station, and the engine's on our carriage, there's only one coach on each end and they come over bombing, and I

don't think wheels of that truck touched the rails into a tunnel, so as to keep the engines from getting blasted

[DL] When you arrived, erm at Pilson, what happened to you after that point?

[AG] Well, I joined up with another column, and just marched

[DL] And the other column, was that made up of other prisoners of war, or was the concentration camp victims...

[AG] No, there was no concentration camps that I knew moved out, these were all prisoners

[DL] And how were you treated during the course of your march?

[AG] We were treated alright – they couldn't give us no food, we had a scrounge everything, but I didn't see any, how can I put it, cruelty, cause they were the same as us see, mainly old war people, they were not too bad at all. But then, we were put in three barns on the side of the hill, and what the Red Cross done, and Jerry agreed to it, sent some wagons to the Swiss border, they were loaded up with parcels, Red Cross parcels, and told to find the columns. Then, we had three of these wagons hit us, so we were alright for food then. And then we stopped in there for a fortnight I suppose

[DL] When about was this now?

[AG] Eh?

[DL] What date would you say roughly this happened, and roughly where about were you at this point?

[AG] I can't tell you where it was, it was somewhere in, in Germany, making towards the coast, I don't know, I don't know the name of the place

[DL] And which month would you say this was?

[AG] Er May, this was April time

[DL] And so at what point were you then freed from German captivity?

[AG] What happened was we let one night, evening, we decided two or three of us, we was on the village at the bottom of the hill, we'd go and have a pint. So we all marched down the village, and I went away in the pub, I said we wanted beer, and the Jerry said we're not serving you, so two of us jumped over the bar and got our own.

[00:45:00]

[AG] We had some money we could pay, you know camp money, and at the end of this room, you know, there was a load of old hatcheries you know, signs, course they looked black as ink, well we had them all singing before we left. Well next night, we looked out and down in the valley there was some vehicles with yellow, yellow sheets on them. Well we didn't know what that meant; it was identification, American identification. And the next things we knew was a jeep coming up, and the silly

blighters loaded with fags, all they had on them, fags. So they said, right don't go out tonight, we're going to mortar the woods, alright, and the next morning we'd made friends with the farmer, two or three of us, made friends with the farmer cause the Jerry couldn't feed us we had to go out, get food where we could. And er, we thought we wonder what's happened to our friends. It was mother and father and three little kiddies

[DL] These were your farmers?

[AG] The farmers this was see, so me and my mate, the other mate stopped, with the gear what we had because if the gear was left, it wasn't there when you got back

[DL] And the gear being?

[AG] Well what you was carrying you know, what, could make what you got, see that, nothing much might be over a coat, or something like that see, we got there, went in, couldn't see nobody, all the chickens were in their pens, and all the cows and the rest of it, and I happened to look up, and they were in the corner in the attic. I said come on, get out "No, the Americans will kill us". I said "what the hell are you talking about?", "well the SS will be back, will be through presently", well I said "there ain't no SS, they're all gone", they were that scared of their own people. Anyway, they come down and we'd give them tea, one thing or another, and the kids the bit of chocolate we had, and we come on

[DL] And that's when you met up with the Americans?

[AG] Yeah

[DL] And then what happened? You were taken where?

[AG] The Americans, don't put this down, rotten buggers the lot, they got no discipline

[DL] We are recording this

[AG] Oh bugger

[DL] So what happened when you were then freed by the Americans? What happened to you?

[AG] We had to jump the wagons, cause they couldn't provide wagons, we landed in a town, and er, the er, there was an American military sergeant there, and we got off the wagon and he took us in this beautiful new, new, barracks, opened the door and said "what do I do with these Bill?", and that was a Brigadier. You don't call a Brigadier "Bill!"

[DL] But what happened to you at that point?

[AG] They gradually ferried us, we got back to, er, it was an aerodrome we got back, and erm, we wanted somewhere to sleep and we found a guesthouse with a poor old lady in the, got in there and couldn't find her.

[00:50:00]

[AG] Anyway, she did come in and I explained we was waiting and she said that was alright, and the poor lady, we found an SS store full of food, so she had a big table you, she could sit fifteen, so we found two boilers, got thee going, and in walks two boys with six cockerels. So I says to her can you see to these, she says "where did you get them?" Oh, we said we found them walking, killed em, everything went in the boiler. So we laid everything out properly, you know planes and what have you, and then, couple of boys had found an SS store, full of tinned fruit, cream and all that, so we had a good afters as well, with pudding as well. But the old lady who was there, I said "come on ma'am, your house, we're using your stuff, top of the table". Oh and she was dribbling, she said no, she said "no I can't" – "why?", she said the SS, the SS will kill you, I said no.

[DL] So what actually happened at that point, when did you then fly from where you were back into Britain?

[AG] I landed back in Britain the 8th May, forty...forty-four, I suppose it was?

[DL] Forty-five?

[AG] Forty-five, and er, the er, Aylesbury, somewhere around Aylesbury, jumped out the plane and er, had to get deloused, the powder in there, this big hut being deloused, all the women, Army making tea for us

[DL] And at this point, did you, were you having nightmares of your time at Auschwitz?

[AG] Not until I actually got home. When I got home, after about a week, a plane came over and I was under the bed. But that gradually faded

[DL] And was that because of the air raids that actually happened...

[AG] Yeah

[DL] In terms of what you witnessed, er with the Jews and how the SS treated the Jews, did that haunt you after the war?

[AG] No, no

[DL] Even though you had witnessed firsthand...

[AG] No it didn't

[DL] Is there a reason why it didn't?

[AG] Yes, because I'm a hard man, a really hard man, what I seen, nobody would believe, I'm a hard man. I'd never want counselling for nothing I've done, and I've been with the police, I've been helping undertakers, but I've never wanted counselling, and I've scraped them off the floor

[DL] And this was in your civilian role after the war?

[AG] Yes

[DL] And during the war did you feel that you, your attitudes towards what you were witnessing, at IG Farben, did you feel your attitudes harden?

[AG] You had to be hard, you had to be hard, it's no good. I was lucky; I was in a unit which wasn't a fighting unit.

[00:55:00]

[AG] We could fight if we had to, but we weren't front line troops

[DL] Would you say that the British POW troops at Auschwitz, at E175 Auschwitz, did they empathise with the Jews, or, or was there this hardness which you talk about?

[AG] No, you, how can I put it, you do what you could for the Jews, but you had to be hard in case you got shot. You get what I mean? If the SS saw you talking to Jews or trying to help Jews, they'd just as likely shoot ye

[DL] So there was a real fear of...

[AG] Oh yeah, you stuck to your own discipline

[DL] Because earlier we talked about Ron Jones, and Ron Jones being scared of the gas chambers and you were saying the British on the whole weren't scared of the gas chambers

[AG] Yeah we weren't scared of them

[DL] But, you're saying that you were potentially scared of being shot if you were seen talking with the Jews

[AG] Well yeah, they do, they would do, until they killed one of our boys, then in the end we had the SS running

[DL] What makes you say that?

[AG] Well, a twelve pound sledge hammer from scaffolding makes a lovely hitter mind

[DL] Are you referring to the plan which the British were going to put into effect for, er the murder of Corporate Reynolds?

[AG] Well, it's part Corporate Reynolds, although in the end, same as I say, the SS got wary of us

[DL] And was the plan ever put into effect of dropping weight onto those you considered to be responsible?

[AG] We did a couple

[DL] Would you like to elaborate?

[AG] No

[DL] So were they SS that the British POWs er attacked on that occasion?

[AG] No they, they were, the SS were great men of their own ideas, but they'd never come up against proper fighting Englishmen. If you were ordered to be there you were there. And you stopped there. You either stopped there on the floor, or pulled out when you was told to. You never ran.

[DL] So what you're saying is the British did attack erm SS, at some point?

[AG] Yeah

[DL] So when did the British attack and how many did they attack?

[AG] I don't know, I'm talking about in the general war now mind

[DL] Oh okay so not in Auschwitz, not in...

[AG] No, we couldn't, couldn't do it in Auschwitz

[DL] Okay. After the war, you gave evidence to er, to the trials, the IG Farben trial in Nuremberg. What evidence did you actually give?

[AG] Well more or less what I'm telling you

[DL] And your feelings looking back on the evidence which you gave?

[AG] Was right, yeah

[DL] Looking back at your time at er, er, er E175 Auschwitz, what are your feelings about what you witnessed there?

[AG] My feelings are that it was how can I put it? Greed that caused a lot of this, greed, I got to be better than everyone else, greed, to hell with everyone else

[DL] Greed by the Nazis?

[AG] Yeah, yeah, when you get ordinary German people, German people I'm talking about like this, cowed, looking turning around, looking behind them all the time...

[DL] When you returned to this country, how did people react to you, to your return, how did people actually react to you being a POW at Auschwitz?

[01:00:00]

[AG] They didn't know. I can tell you a story, I wanted to go home, go down Cornwall, I got on a train, here with another boy, ex POW at Auschwitz, I didn't know him but there were two women on the train, on the carriage, they didn't know him but they just showed their pictures and the papers, and they wouldn't believe it, and we stuck it, as long as we could then we exploded. They didn't believe it. And, I'm going to tell you this, there's a lot of English people today who don't believe it

[DL] Having witnessed it yourself, having been there, how does that make you feel?

[AG] Angry. They never told the history at school about Auschwitz, you see, they hid it

[DL] And how long did it take for you to be able to talk about your experiences at Auschwitz?

[AG] Oh, two, three years

[DL] Why did it take you so long, and who did you tell?

[AG] Well, in general conversation that's all

[DL] And what reaction did you get from the people you told?

[AG] People that had been in the services were alright, they understood but the majority of people wouldn't believe it [SNEEZE]

[DL] The majority of people wouldn't believe you were in E175 Auschwitz, or wouldn't believe what you had seen?

[AG] They would, they wouldn't believe what the Germans had been doing

[DL] And did you try to explain to them?

[AG] Yeah we tried [SNEEZE], we tried to

[DL] And did eventually, did you give up trying to explain?

[AG] Well, it faded

[DL] Would you say there wasn't very much interest?

[AG] Yeah

[DL] What did you do after the war, as a job and did you actually finally retire?

[AG] O I was, I er, went to a factory here down at Yatonfordhigh, they got declared bankrupt, then I went back on the building, I joined the constabulary, went on for a bit, then I became a civilian member of the constabulary

[DL] Did you ever return to Auschwitz?

[AG] No

[DL] There's been an international bestseller published, entitled '*The Man who broke into Auschwitz*', it's er, the story of Dennis Avey

[AG] Yes

[DL] What's your view?

[AG] My view is it could happen, but maybe I'm not saying he's a liar but...

[DL] Do you believe it to be true?

[AG] Could be, could be, cause our Charlie Coward, we heard there was an Englishman in Auschwitz, a Naval Officer, Sea Officer, Charlie Coward, that's what we was told changed uniform. He put on a, what we called a stripy uniform, and the Jew he put on, put on his uniform, he said we couldn't find the bloke.

[01:05:00]

[DL] Do you believe Charlie Coward's story?

[AG] What from knowing the bloke, I do. He was a damned good bloke to me, to the camp, he done everything for us

[DL] A lot of people don't believe Charlie Coward's story, and a lot of people don't believe Dennis Avey's story...

[AG] A lot of people jealous. There's a lot of people thought Charlie could do, like a little god, but he was hammered down just as we were

[DL] When you look back at this period of your life, how big an effect did Auschwitz actually have on you as a, as an individual?

[AG] Well, to a certain extent out of it, but not very much

[DL] Even though you witnessed as you said...

[AG] Yeah, yeah

[DL] ...the killing of Jews in the factory

[AG] yeah, I know, I'm hard bloke, you had to be, tis no good lying down

[DL] And were you ever left with any memories of, of those killings, or of the gas chambers, or the knowledge of the gas chambers?

[AG] No, you can, how can I put it, you could smell it all the time, but it didn't settle sort of on me anyway

[DL] Is there anything else you want to add?

[AG] No

[DL] Thank you

[01:07:21]

ENDS