United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Harold Burson

November 19, 2013

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Calvin J. Everson, RPR, CRR, National Court Reporters Association.

HAROLD BURSON

November 19, 2013

Question: So this is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Harold Burson conducted by Mike Abramowitz on November 19th, 2013, at the Meyerhoff Theater at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. So welcome, Mr. Burson. Nice to have you here.

Answer: Nice to be here.

Q: So you're from Memphis, Tennessee, correct?

A: Originally.

Q: Okay.

A: But I've been in New York since 1942.

Q: All right. Well, tell us a little bit about growing up in Memphis.

A: All right.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your parents and where you went to school.

A: My mother and father came to the United States about a year before I was born, in 1919.

Q: Where did they come from?

A: They came from Yorkshire, Leeds, England. So I grew up in the South, but I didn't grow up in a Southern household.

Q: I see. And you went to public schools in Memphis?

A: I went to public schools in Memphis. In fact, I went to the same high school that Elvis Presley went to.

Q: Which high school was that?

A: Humes High School. I was 13 years ahead of him.

Q: Did you ever meet Elvis Presley?

A: I never met him, but we are both in the Humes High Hall of Fame.

Q: Congratulations. And your parents, what did they do?

A: My father had a hardware store that went busted during the depression, and my mother ended up supporting the family by selling clothes doortodoor in in black neighborhoods.

Q: Now, would you describe your growing up as being in a being particularly poor, hard, or was it more middle class? What was how would you describe growing up?

A: Well, I I never went hungry, but my mother thought that people were rich if they paid the rent on time. Now, money was always a problem. I knew that I had to pay my own way through college, and I graduated from high school when I was 15.

Q: That seems very unusual. How did that happen? You must have been precocious.

A: That happened because my father was an omnivorous reader, and according to my mother, he taught started teaching me to read when I was three years old. So I went to school when I was six. In those days schools in Memphis did not have kindergarten, and so I started in the first grade when I was six. I stayed in one room for about two days and someone came and took me to another room and that was the second grade, and I stayed there about a week and then they took me to another room and that was the third grade. So I started school in the third grade.

Q: Okay. And how did you end up at Ole Miss?

A: I ended up at Ole Miss because I could pay my way through school by writing for the Memphis Commercial Appeal, which was the big regional newspaper

Q: Did they have a bureau in Jack was it Jackson?

A: They have a bureau in Jackson, but I had nothing to do with that. Commercial Appeal served not only Memphis, but west Tennessee, northern Mississippi, and eastern Arkansas.

Q: I see. Were you the stringer for the paper?

A: I was a stringer for the paper at 14 cents a column inch. I had been a copy boy there for two summers, and the man who really gave me the idea of going to Ole Miss was what they called a tristate editor, and he knew that I needed the money to go to school, and he said, "If you go to Ole Miss, you can have the stringer job." And he said, "I'll see that you get enough published to pay your way through school."

Q: What are the kinds of stories you wrote about?

A: You know, everything that goes on on a college campus. There would be lecturers who would come on the campus, and I would write a story that said that so and so was going to come and speak on such and such a date, and then that would be three or four weeks or three or four months before he came. And then the day before, I would say do another little story and say he was going to be here tomorrow, and then I would do a story on what he said. So I sort of worked out the system, and most of that stuff got published, but the I guess the outstanding accomplishment was I did an interview of Faulkner, and

when Faulkner returned from Hollywood back to Oxford, I had the first interview with him, and it was I was asked to do a rewrite for the AP and also for the book section of the New York Herald Tribune.

Q: I see. And how did you find Faulkner?

A: How did I get in touch with

Q: How did you what were your impressions of Faulkner?

A: Oh, my impressions of him? It was a cold winter day, and I went out to his home, which is called Rowan Oaks. It is sort of a stately Southern mansion. And he was writing when I got there, and he did all of his writing in a woodshed that had no heat in it, and he came back into the house and sort of rubbing his hands, and he he was he seemed to me, he came across at the beginning as very shy, you know, like a deer in the headlights, and seemed ill at ease, but after maybe three or four minutes he loosened up and I think one of the problems was with the interview, as I go back and look read it from time to time, I really didn't know enough about what he had done as a writer. I had not I had read one of his books, so it is it is not a really penetrating interview, but it it did get a lot of attention, and and the biggest news out of it was that he told me that he was going to do this trilogy on Yoknapatawpha County.

Q: It is amazing that for a 16yearold

A: Well, I was I was in about that was my junior year. I was 18.

Q: 18. Okay.

A: I was 18, yeah.

Q: So what did you study at Ole Miss?

A: I majored in economics and English, had a double major.

Q: Okay. And you continued to write for the paper all the way through?

A: All the way through.

Q: And then I also read that you had been appointed by the president of the university to run the news bureau?

A: Run a college newspaper, which was

Q: Tell us a little bit about that?

A: The the man who preceded me got fired. I had been at school for twoandahalf years, I was in the middle of my junior year, and by that time I was regarded as probably the best news person on the campus. At that time it was a very small school, it had 1600

students, and and I had this unique situation where I knew the chancellor extremely well and he knew me, and the news bureau office is a place where they had correspondents from the Jackson newspapers, New Orleans Times/Picayune Herald correspondent, and that was our place where they assigned us space. And, also, there was an FDR new deal program called the National Youth Administration, which was intended to get money into the hands of college students, and so they they had about five job allocations, and these people went around the campus and gathered news, and they would put out what we called "hometowners." Suzy Brown got elected president of a sorority, and they would write that paragraph, and then another paragraph about what a great university the University of Mississippi was, and they would send them out, and the local papers in Mississippi would run them.

Q: I see. So your job was to run the news bureau?

A: Yeah, run the news bureau. And I was at that time 18 years old.

Q: I see. So is that like the public relations department for the university?

A: That was a public relations part, and

Q: And you worked directly for the president?

A: Yeah, the chancellor

Q: The chancellor. What was his name?

A: Butts, Butts. Alfred B. Butts, Butts. He ended up running the

Q: Can we pause for one minute.

(Interruption in proceedings.)

Q: So this is a continuation of a Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Harold Burson. So, Mr. Burson, we just were talking about your time at Ole Miss, and it sounded like you always wanted to be a writer, that that was something you were good at, and was that something that you wanted to

A: That's that's true. And I wanted to come to New York

Q: Okay.

A: from the time I was 10 or 12 years old.

Q: Okay. So after you graduated, you moved to New York?

A: After I graduated, I went to work for the Commercial Appeal. I was a reporter. And I had this crazy notion that someone was going to discover me and take me to New York, and it happened six months later. And the circumstances of it were that Congress had

passed a selective service bill in August of 1940, and that set off a very large construction program, particularly so in the south/southwest, and I got the story that the war department was going to build a large shellloading plant, ammunition plant, about 85 miles from Memphis. I met the contractor representatives early on, established a good relationship with them, and it was apparent from day one there was going to be a major labor problem, and the problem was that a union shop contractor was hired to build the biggest project that had ever happened in the state of Tennessee in a nonunion area, and they were going to have to negotiate some way that these nonunion people could work at this on this construction job. And the head of the the owner of the engineering and building company that built it, the company that had headquarters in New York and Cleveland, was a very farsighted individual, and he knew that this was going to be a major story because it was the first time in the war construction program that this situation had been encountered, and this was going to be the paradigm of projects of that kind, and he asked me if I could get a leave of absence from the paper to help him through this crisis they were going to have, and he asked me how

(Interruption in proceedings.)

Q: So this is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Harold Burson. So we were just talking very briefly about your move to New York to work for a construction firm.

A: An engineering/building firm, one of the largest in the country. And after I did go he asked me a question, he said, "How much do they pay you?" And I said, "$25 a week." And he said, "Well, we will double that." And he said, "Do you have a car?" And I said, "No, sir." And he said, "Well, we will get you a car." And I knew that at some point I was going to get drafted, and also I knew in the back of my mind this guy's offices were in New York, and if I played this right, I might be able to get myself jumped up to New York. And so the labor problem was settled in five or six weeks, and I was not doing anything, and his people knew senior people knew that I was sort of anxious and itchy, and they told him, and he called me and said, "Sit tight until I come down." And he came down, and he said, "We would like for you to be a permanent part of our company." And he was farsighted enough to know that the construction engineering field was going to have a lot of new competition because the war was going to make small companies big companies, and he said, "We are going to have to pay more attention to public relations, marketing," so forth and so on, and he said, "Our people think that you might be good for that job," and

Q: What was the name of that company?

A: The H.K. Ferguson Company.

Q: The H.K. Ferguson Company.

A: At that time it was one of the largest engineering/building companies, industrial building, and

Q: Now, did you have any doubts about moving from being a from covering the news to representing the news makers?

A: No, I had no doubts, no problems.

Q: That's what you wanted to do?

A: Yeah. Well, I I figured it would make use I've always considered that my basic skill is writing, and so I felt that I would, very frankly, make more money if I did it as a public relations person than as a news person. I wasn't really very purist on that issue. And he said, "The best way for you to learn our business is to travel with me for awhile," so I traveled with this man for two

Q: He was the CEO of the company?

A: He was the owner of the company.

Q: Owner of the company.

A: For twoandahalf years, and based in New York, and we would travel for two weeks and I would be in New York for two weeks, where I started automatically doing publicity for the company. And I got to know the business press and the trade press extremely well. I could I had an unlimited expense account. Of course, back then it didn't cost very much to take somebody to lunch or to dinner, and I would have a lunch date every day with some reporter or editor, and dinner with them, and so that continued until late 1943. I was getting automatic deferments because this was an essential war contractor. And from the very beginning, I took the position I'm not going to let the war end without my being in the Army, and so I told him toward the end of '43 that, "Don't apply for a deferment for me anymore because I'm going into the Army," and I called up my draft board, and they obliged me by drafting me.

Q: And your draft board was in Tennessee or in

A: In Tennessee.

Q: Okay. And so you got drafted in 1943?

A: End of '43.

Q: End of '43. And

A: And I went into an engineer they put me into an engineer combat group.

Q: Okay. And what did you do for the engineer combat group?

A: I was sort of in operations. We were doing bridging, road repair work, demining, taking mines out of everything.

Q: Were you based in the United States or did you go to Europe?

A: No, I was was in one week or two weeks, rather, after I finished basic training, I was put on a boat in Boston and went to Europe. I went to first we landed in England. I was in Normandy about eight weeks after the invasion, and we pulled mines out of the hedgerows.

Q: I see. So you went in after after the DDay invasion?

A: Yeah, uhhuh. No well, I went into Normandy after DDay, yeah, but I had basic training at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin.

Q: And so your assignment when you got to Europe was demining?

A: That was the first.

Q: What are some of the other kinds of things you did?

A: Bridge construction/repair, road repair, supporting.

Q: All right. So I'm curious since we are going to talk about Nuremberg, did you had you heard of the Nazi atrocities? Had the GIs had many of your colleagues had any sense of what the Nazis had been up to behind behind the lines?

A: I you know, I was aware of the concentration camps when when I was in Europe or even even probably before I went to Europe, but I had no idea of the magnitude of them.

Q: So you joined an outfit called the Armed Forces Network?

A: American Forces Network.

Q: American Forces Network?

A: Yeah.

Q: And when did that happen?

A: That happened right after the war in Europe was over.

Q: So that was like in the second half of 1945?

A: Well, in May.

Q: In May.

A: May 1945.

Q: And were you sent to Nuremberg at that point?

A: No, no, no.

Q: What were some of the stories that you worked on? First of all, actually excuse me. Let me backtrack for a second. Tell us about the American Forces Network?

A: American Forces Network was arguably the best radio network that ever existed, and the reason for that is that not only did they have some of the best Hollywood producers, directors and so forth, and also some very experienced news people, but we were able we got all of the programming from the four American networks. There were four radio networks back then, and our Sunday night lineup would have Jack Benny, Jimmy Durante, Bob Hope; whereas, the other networks back in the States, they had one of them on each. And, also, we had a repertoire theater that had such people in it as Marlene Dietrich, Mickey Rooney, Celeste Holm, who would come visit us when they were between assignments for USO, things like that. It was a very professional operation. It had 63 stations in Europe, and

Q: And where were you based when you were working for them?

A: Well, when I started, I started in Paris, which was also one of the great attractions at that time. Americans were loved back then, and

Q: And what were some of your assignments?

A: Well, I I didn't cover anything until Nuremberg. I did we did news shows, 15minute news on, you know, 12, three, six, nine, and fiveminute summaries at the start of every hour, and I was on the rewrite desk to update those news shows.

Q: I see. So you were a writer for the news shows?

A: Yeah, that's right.

Q: Did you ever

A: No, I never did

Q: appear on line?

A: No, my voice was not a radio voice, and also I had more of a Southern accent than I do now.

Q: Okay. So you were writing for the news shows

A: Yup.

Q: based in Paris?

A: Yeah. And and one day around the 1st of November, I got a message from to go up and see the colonel who was running the AFN, and he said, "We are going to really do a first rate job of covering the Nuremberg trial, and I want you to take on the assignment." And and there were two I think basic reasons why I got the job. One was that I came into the Army late, so I knew that I was going to be there for about a year after the war was over, so and the people who had been at AFN were leaving because they had a number of points to go home. And the Army did a great job of demobilizing the troops, and you knew almost at the end of World War II in Europe when you were going home, and you could figure it within a week almost, and so I knew it was going to be in May of '46 that I was going to come home, and I talked to my commanding officer about it, and he was an old AP guy, and he got me appointments at Stars and Stripes, Yank, and AFN, and AFN offered me a job, so I moved from Germany down to Paris and stayed there four or five months.

Q: So you were in Germany with the engineering corps?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Moved to Paris to work for AFN?

A: Yeah. And and as I say, I just did updates on

Q: What was it like living in Europe at that time?

A: It depended on where in Europe you were.

Q: For you.

A: For me, it was you know, Europe if you were in I spent most of my time was in we were holed up in an area on the border where Germany, Belgium and Holland come together. And Atkinson does a great job of talking about that battle, which was one of the decisive battles of the war. And so the people lived fairly well. You know, they didn't have any there seemed to be enough food. You know, the area that we were in had not been devastated at all. We were based in Holland, actually, about two miles from the front, and, you know, it was you about we were in front of the artillery, and so you had to get used to the sound of shells going over your head every night, but the people, you know, learned to live, you know, without recreational stuff, without amusements. You know, people hadn't had any new clothes for five or six years, so but the worst part of it was when on living things was watching how the people in Nuremberg lived.

Q: Right. So you were assigned to cover the trial in the fall of 1945, and you moved to Nuremberg?

A: Yeah.

Q: And, again, your job was writing scripts for the correspondents, right?

A: No, a script that would be delivered just like an evening news show here.

Q: I see.

A: Yeah.

Q: I see.

A: But it was only on one subject.

Q: Right, only on one subject. So did you did you attend all the proceedings at the time you were there?

A: I attended all the every proceeding for five for five months.

Q: That must have been an amazing experience.

A: It was.

Q: Did you have a sense of the history when you were doing it?

A: Oh, yeah, uhhuh. Yeah, yeah.

Q: And tell us a little bit about how you wanted to cover the trial? Did you did they give you any direction of what they wanted or did you have a lot of leeway on your own?

A: Well, the direction I got was we want a straightforward account of what went on in the courtroom. And your audiences, you have two principal audiences. One were the million or so American soldiers who were still in Europe; the other was Englishspeaking Germans. And one of the reasons for that was that there were surveys of where people Germans got their news and credibility were done, and the American Forces Network was the most credible news source in Germany for several years after the war, and the reason for it is, is the Germans felt that the Americans would not lie to their own troops.

Q: So this is really you had a really good audience for your broadcasts?

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Q: And did you work can you tell us anything about the correspondents you worked or not the correspondents, but did you work with anyone in particular for colleagues?

A: Well, I yeah, Howard K. Smith and I got to be very close friends, and

Q: Was he covering this for CBS?

A: CBS.

Q: He must have been a young reporter then?

A: Yeah. Well, he was Howard was in his late thirties then, probably 37, 38. He and I would swap things. You know, we weren't competitive. And he became one of my closest friends for the rest of his life.

Q: I think did William Shirer ever cover the trial

A: Shirer Shirer never covered the trial, no.

Q: Okay.

A: No, huhuh.

Q: Okay. So it was Howard K. Smith. Were there any other household names of reporters who covered the trial?

A: Well, Walter Cronkite was with United Press, and he was they had a fourperson news team there, and he was the most junior of four people. And when I saw him on TV, I couldn't I just couldn't recognize him because he was sort of a mousy kind of a guy when he was at Nuremberg, and, you know, but he came across with such great confidence and and so he I remained friends with him until he died.

Q: Do you remember talking to him at the time?

A: Oh, yeah, yeah. We weren't really close. I got to know him more after the war than before.

Q: But Howard K. Smith was one of your closest

A: Yeah, Howard K. Smith I would say was one of my closest friends.

Q: And by the way, where were you in the courtroom every day? Where was the press gallery?

A: Well, they had a balcony that sort of overhung the courtroom, and the balcony is here, and the jury I mean, and the defendants were down right below us.

Q: So you saw the back of their heads?

A: No, no, I saw the front. I

Q: So they were facing you?

A: Facing us. And I'd say suspect I was not more than 30 feet away from Goering. Goering was on the end of the bench and

Q: So which which of the Nazis were you particularly interested in? I mean, obviously they are all fascinating in a terrible way, but who did you focus on?

A: Well, of course, Goering. They there

Q: Well, tell us about Goering a little bit.

A: Well, Goering, you know, had the American press, you know, during the war you know, after he didn't win the Battle of Britain, he his Air Force did nothing in DDay, so he, you know, was the anointed successor to Hitler from almost the start of the party until those events, and he lost Hitler's favor, and he started on narcotics, got fat, and he was sort of portrayed in the American press as a buffoon. He, you know, actually you know, he won the equivalent of the Medal of Honor twice in World War II World War I, and fairly well educated, and and, you know, was one of the members of that 20 group who was more upper middle class than most of the people there, and he had this commanding, almost charismatic, personality that you knew who the most powerful guy in that room was.

Q: By the way he carried himself?

A: By the way he carried himself. And, you know, he he sort of dominated the courtroom. Everybody looked at him, you know, when something happened. But and he was extremely articulate, very credible. He he wanted his big objective was to protect his honor as a soldier, and and he was on record as saying he knew he was going to get executed, but he wanted a soldier's death, and that meant a firing squad, and they weren't about to do that, and so he obviously arranged to do otherwise, took this arsenic tablet before he

Q: Were there other any of the other defendants did any of the other defendants, you know, stick out in your mind at the time?

A: Yes, but not very positively. Most of them were well, practically all of them were depressed; particularly the military people. Schacht, who was a finance minister and who was one of the three people acquitted, he was upbeat most of the time; obviously a very bright guy. I'd say about half of them, you know, you would think was a plumber or something like that, you know, read water meters. Of course, you know, Streicher was you know, he was sort of the scum of the earth not only to the to the people in the courtroom, but also to his fellow defendants. They the military people, you know I think, you know, acted like they they were order takers, they weren't going to challenge anybody, they were interested in their military careers. They of course, Hess was sort of, you know, the light comedy touch, you know, sort of like crazy like a fox, you know, and he would carry on with little antics every now and then.

Q: Were you did they come across as mass murderers?

A: No. No. There there were a couple of them, like a guy named Sauckel, who ran a labor force, and Kaltenbrunner, were like thugs. You know, he he did

not they probably the most elegant of the people there was Speer, who was the architect. He was going to rebuild Germany. And, you know, he has been probably the mystery person of the whole thing because he came from a welltodo family, and he was just like a 28 or nine year old architect, and Hitler took a liking to him, and eventually he headed up all the industry manufacturing groups, but he a lot of since, you know, the last 30, 40 years, there have been several books on very critical of him that he should not have got in bed with Hitler. It was totally out of his character and his family and so forth.

Q: You know, the other great character in the news room in the courtroom was Judge Jackson.

A: Justice Jackson.

Q: Justice Jackson. Do you remember the opening statement the fourhour opening statement

A: Oh, yeah. I thought he did a magnificent job. Jackson I think made a mistake in doing the crossexamination of Goering, and in my script I don't treat him too kindly. And I remember the morning after, Tom Dodd, who was Jackson's chief of staff, later became senator from Connecticut, I just happened to pass him going into the courtroom, and he said, "You were pretty rough on the chief last night." And I said to him, "Didn't you think he deserved it?" And he just but what happened was what Jackson's problem was, that he didn't know enough of the history, and he would ask a question, and Goering would usually find something wrong with his question, he got some of the facts mixed up, and, you know, he did not do well. He did well in I wasn't there, but I read his testimony I read his closing speech was a good speech, he did very well, and I understand he wrote most of the stuff himself, but but Jackson himself, you know, was the architect of the whole show. He was the one who really pushed it in the direction that it went.

Q: Did did you ever have an opportunity as a reporter to meet privately with any of the prosecutors, you know, for a briefing for them to explain what you were going to see or was your only interaction seeing what happened in the courtroom itself?

A: Mainly what happened in the courtroom, because, again, Jackson did not encourage his staff to talk to the mediA:

Q: Did any of the other prosecutors?

A: I I don't know what happened, you know, with the French or the British.

Q: But you had enough material happening right in front of you?

A: Oh, yeah, right, yeah. It was it was happening, you know, and almost every day I'd there were very few days when I had trouble figuring out what am I going to lead with.

Q: It was interesting reading a few of your scripts how detailed they were.

A: Yeah.

Q: These were these were not just wire service stories.

A: No.

Q: You had a lot of detail about what was happening.

A: Yeah. And I I took copious notes, and I when I got the assignment, you know, I started reading about I went over to the International Herald Tribune _____, and I just went back to the thirties, some of the big events that happened, like Kristallnacht, and some of the earlier reporting on concentration camps, and so, you know, I I tried to prepare myself as much as possible.

Q: All right. Now, did you were you surprised by the extent of the Nazi depravity? Because you mentioned you had sort of a general sense of what had happened, but the details were quite astonishing.

A: Yeah. Well, they you know, the the first time that the pictures of the concentration camps were shown was Nuremberg, and, you know, it was horrendous, you know, and the whole courtroom, you know, you could just hear the gasps, you know, and it really it was really the magnitude. You know, we knew they did these things. The the other point that about the trial itself and the fairness of it, the Germans convicted themselves because of their documentation. And I'll give you an example of that. When Goering was being questioned by MaxwellFife, MaxwellFife said, "What is the first duty of a prisoner of war?" And Goering said, "To escape." And the Luftwaffe, Goering had had responsibility for running the prison camps for all captured Air Force people. They didn't go into the general Army pool of prisoners of war. They were in they called them Luft stalags. And Goering said, "To escape." And he said pulled out a document, and he said, "Do you know have you ever visited this Luft Stalag," whatever the name of it was, and Goering said he was there once or twice. And he said, "Have you ever heard the names," and he read four English pilots; and Goering said, "No, I never heard of them." He said, "Well, were you aware that they tried to escape and were captured and brought back?" And Goering said, "I don't know anything about that." And he said then they like three months later escaped again, and they were brought back, and he said, "Would it surprise you if I told you that they were executed?" And Goering said and he said, "What would you have done if you knew that?" And he said, "I would have reprimanded those who were responsible for doing it." And he pulls out this letter, and it is asking for

permission to execute them, and Goering not only says "okay," or the equivalent, but he says, "This will show the others what will happen to them if they try to escape."

Q: You watched this in the courtroom as it unfolded?

A: Yeah. And Goering was just crestfallen. That's the only time that he really was just didn't know what to say.

Q: Did you recall at all being struck by the Soviet judge or the Soviet prosecutors? Do you recall what kind of role they played?

A: Very neutral. They you know, they were there along just for the ride, and they you know, I don't think they took it really seriously. The the most I got in contact with, at the castle where we stayed, they had converted one of the rooms into a very nice little bar, and in the evenings it was the bar was pretty well full, and there was one Russian who was a jolly sort of a guy, didn't speak any English at all, but he was fascinated by the different kinds of glasses that different drinks came in, and so he would line up everything from Cointreau to Tom Collins practically, like six or eight glasses, ten glasses. And Russians, you know, didn't have any money, and drinks were like 20 cents, so the Americans, you know, would toss money into the pot, and he would drink all these drinks, and he did it night after night.

Q: This is one of the prosecutors?

A: No, no, no. This was one of the news men.

Q: One of the news men.

A: One of the news men. Yeah, one of the news men, yeah, yeah. But, you know, most of them couldn't speak English. There were a couple of them who could, but they were very circumspect.

Q: Put yourself back at this time. Did you feel like you were watching a process that was fair, that seemed like you know, it may not have been perfect justice, but that rough justice was being done at the time? What was your feeling at the time?

A: It was as close as you could come when the winner tries the loser. And one of the questions that we asked Jackson was, "Why do you say that they are being given a fair trial?" And he went into great detail and says, you know, "We let them choose their own lawyers, and so if they wanted a Nazi for a lawyer, we approved that. We paid the lawyers. We gave them a place to work and fitted it out for them. We gave them copies of all the documents before we introduced them." You know, they did whatever they possibly could. And, also, the the judge Judge they could object, and a lot of times the objections were sustained. So I think it came as close as you could get to, you know, AngloSaxon type justice. And the other thing about it that I think speaks in favor of

what of a fair trial is there was a good deal of variation in the sentences. You know, there was 11, I think, of the 20

Q: And some were acquitted, too?

A: Huh?

Q: And some were acquitted, too?

A: Three were acquitted.

Q: Right.

A: Three were acquitted. One of them should never have been tried, Fritzsche, who was Goebbels' he was like the fourth ranked guy under Goebbels, but but there was none of the rest of them were left, so he he got it. And so they and the judges, you know, saw that, you know, he was not really part of the group, so he was only about 38 years old, too, I think.

Q: Tell us, by the way, speaking of media people, Streicher was obviously convicted and later hung.

A: Hung, yeah.

Q: What were your impressions of Streicher? He comes across as a thug.

A: Oh, a slob. You know, just an uncouth individual.

Q: But did it seem to you that he was on trial, too, even though he was, you know, a you know, a publisher, he wasn't actually a part of the Nazi apparatus?

A: You know, he had very little power, practically no power, as far as running the country is concerned, but but I think I think it was great symbolism to to include him, because he was so, you know you know, back during that period there was hardly a week or two or three weeks that you didn't read about Streicher in the American press as to remarks that he had made or things that he had done, antiSemitic stuff, you know.

Q: So he was really conditioning the public for

A: Yeah, yeah. And so I I would assume that Streicher was there more for public relations purposes than the fact that he was one of the perpetrators of starting the war or even what he did during the war, you know. He but

Q: Do you were you at all censored by your by your bosses or did they let you pretty much write what you want?

A: You know, as I've gotten older, the greatest surprise that I think as I've thought over this thing, and particularly the way the information policy of the Army is now, is that

literally no one read my script before it went on the air. I read it, and I showed it to my announcer, and every now and then they would say, you know, you are tangling me up in the stuff and could I make the changes, but and and no I never got a negative comment from any of my chain of command. In fact, the only time I ever heard from them was when I got the Jackson thing.

Q: When you really kind of explained how Jackson had messed up?

A: No, no, no, no. When when we got the interview. It was a

Q: Oh, you had a oneonone interview with Justice Jackson?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Q: I did not know that.

A: Yeah. And where a guy that was at

Q: Tell us about that a little bit.

A: Huh?

Q: Tell us about that interview.

A: Well, Jackson at the beginning made a statement that he didn't want to make a circus out of this, and that he didn't want any second guessing on each day's testimony, so he, in effect, you know, admonished his own staff, and he said he would give no interviews until the trial was over. I knew his press secretary or got to know him, Gordon Dean, and I said you know, I tried to get through that, and he said, "No, the boss doesn't want to do it. He is afraid if he does something with you, that will break the line." And one night I got the idea that the approach should be that he owes it to the soldiers who are still there to tell them what he is trying to do, and I told called my went up to see my friend and told him, and and he went and told Jackson what my argument was, and he says, you know, they are talking about people who fought this war who some of them, many of them injured, all of them lost friends, and then Jackson agreed, but he wanted the questions submitted in advance. And he did not change and he didn't change the questions either. He

Q: Do you recall the most do you recall any of the most interesting comments he made that stuck with you?

A: Well, I guess the most quotable thing was that, "These people are being tried not because they lost the war, but because they started the war." And it was the interview was more scholarly than sensational.

Q: But was it the only interview that Jackson gave during the trial?

A: Yeah, uhhuh.

Q: That was a big scoop then.

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, AP

Q: Did it get picked up by

A: AP picked it up, and my hometown newspaper picked it up, and, you know, said, you know, "Memphian Harold Burson," you know.

Q: It was a radio interview, not a

A: A radio interview.

Q: Not a written interview?

A: Yeah, radio, yeah.

Q: We are going to try to wrap up pretty quickly.

A: No, I have time. I have a 5:00 plane.

Q: Okay. Let me ask you a couple other questions about Nuremberg before I move on.

A: Yeah.

Q: At the time of the trial, did you feel that this was a break through in legal affairs, that this was something that was going to really deter future

A: I, like a lot of other people, was fairly naive about this, and, you know, the world was hungry for someone to assure them that there are not going to be any wars like this anymore, and, of course, you know, that was Roosevelt's line, you know, in getting the United Nations off the ground, and one of the things that Nocera pointed out

Q: This is Joe Nocera?

A: Joe Nocera, yeah.

Q: He interviewed you years later?

A: Yeah. Well, two years ago.

Q: Yeah, two years ago.

A: And that's why what brought

Q: Yeah, this brought this all in play.

A: this interest up, huh? Otherwise, it was still sitting on a shelf. Joe said that I guess the way he put it is that there was a refreshing naivety and that reflected world the sentiments of a lot of people in my scripts is one of the reasons he did the article, and the but, you know, in talking to reporters, I didn't find much cynicism.

Q: So people thought this would be a huge advance in

A: Well, let me put it this way. Among the British and the Americans, that's the only ones that could communicate with the media, I didn't find much cynicism in the thing, in the feelings about the trial.

Q: All right. So people felt it was fair?

A: Yeah, yeah, people felt it was fair. Well, a lot of people felt it was more fair than it should be.

Q: Right. And people felt that it was going to stop future dictators or people who wanted to commit genocide?

A: Yeah, that that that Kosovo wouldn't happen, you know, or Rwanda wouldn't happen. And, you know, you've got to remember this was part of a buildup for the United Nations.

Q: Yes.

A: And so but but I I think the trial was as fair as it could be when the winning nation won, and I don't think any other country would have gone as far as the United States did.

Q: Let me just think of one or two other questions. One thing about your reports is that they are really written in a very plain way, not a lot of highfalutin language. It felt to me you were almost trying to talk to the GI.

A: That's what I that was my audience.

Q: Yes.

A: That was my audience.

Q: Right.

A: And I was, you know, close enough to them to to be able to do that.

Q: Right.

A: And the you know, I've often wondered if I could do it again.

Q: Now, did you were you disappointed to leave the trial midway?

A: Huh?

Q: Were you disappointed to leave the trial midway?

A: No.

Q: You were happy to go home?

A: I was happy to go. I wanted to get on with my life.

Q: Okay.

A: I wanted

Q: And tell us just briefly so you missed the final judgment

A: Yeah.

Q: and the end of the story?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. And if you could, because we just have a minute left, just tell us a little bit about this could be a threehour discussion, but just tell us a little bit about how you founded your you know, did this play any role in your future life or

A: Well,

Q: or did you just kind of just put it away

A: Well, Nuremberg didn't play a piece of it. What happened the reason my life turned out the way it did is my boss at the construction company died when I was in the service.

Q: I see.

A: I did not want to go back to the company as an employee. I was wellconnected with the management of the company, and the great mystery that I have not been able to explain fully is, you know, when I was traveling with Mr. Ferguson, I was 21, two and three, and I was his gatekeeper. I controlled his schedule to a large extent. I I received his mail. And the fact that I

(End of videotape, interruption in Proceedings.)

Q: Okay. This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Harold Burson. Mr. Burson, you just were talking a little bit about your life after the war.

A: Yeah, right. Well, yeah, I when he was traveling, I all the stuff came to me first, and the fact that I didn't piss off a lot of people is so remarkable to me that I you know, I just can't explain it, but in fact, you know, I had a lot of people who would you know, were happy that I was there so that I could, you know, expedite what they wanted to do, and it was just a very unique relationship.

Q: So you didn't want to go back just to being an employee?

A: Yeah, that's right.

Q: Does that mean you wanted to start your own firm?

A: So what I did literally the day the war was over, May 8th, 1945, I wrote a letter to the then head of the company and said, "I just don't feel like coming back as an employee, but I do want to maintain a relationship with the company, and I want to start my own public relations firm when I get back, and I want Ferguson Company to be my first client." And about three weeks later, in a crayon he wrote, "We'll do it."

Q: So that was your first client?

A: That was my first client.

Q: So when you got back to the stateside

A: Actually, I stayed home for a couple months in Memphis, and then I came up here to New York, and I was in business, and I got another client, a former employee of Ferguson with another company, and he gave me Ferguson paid me 750 a month, and the other one paid me 500 and gave me office space, which was pretty good for, you know, twice 25 at the time, and and up until 1953, '52, I had five people working for me. And BursonMarsteller started because a friend of mine from New York Times called me and said, "There is this guy Marsteller from Chicago who has got an advertising agency and wants to hire a PR firm for a client, and I've recommended you." And I called Marsteller, and it was the company was Rockwell, and Al Rockwell had bought a helicopter, and it was going to be the first helicopter used for corporate executive travel, and he thought it should have been on the cover of Life magazine, so I got the assignment. It never made the cover of Life for the helicopter, but the helicopter got delayed because of the Vietnam War no, I mean the Korean War. And I suggested that he let me work on a new home workshop power tool that they had developed, and I got him three pages in Life Thanksgiving issue, a $289 item, and they had to go into double shift to satisfy the demand, and they became my first really big client. They paid me

Q: So that's when you decided to go into business with Mr. Marsteller?

A: Marsteller, yeah. Well, and then he got me another client, and I thought this was so good that we should get together, and 30 years later we became the largest PR firm in the world.

Q: Well, that's for another time. Let me just ask you one final question. What did you learn from having witnessed and having covered the Nuremberg trials?

A: That's a good question. Well, the one thing it did, it gave me a lot of confidence. Here I was covering this thing, they and part of my audience was arguably 200 of the most competent correspondents in the world, and they appeared to be to treat me as a peer.

Q: But did it tell you anything either about human nature, or the nature of evil, or some of the big questions?

A: Oh. Well, I you know, I guess it taught I came out of it feeling I didn't realize that human beings could be as depraved as they are. I didn't come out of it with an up upbeat as far as the situation was concerned, but it I think it really gave me a lot of confidence, as like when I started my business, you know, it you know, I

Q: You had handled that case

A: I had handled that, and I can work my way through, and also I, you know, was able to handle my job, which was way beyond my you know, what I thought would be my ability when I was traveling with this man. But I learned a lot from him, and the culture of our firm today is pretty much the culture of his firm, and that is that we take good care of our people.

Q: Well, Mr. Burson, I really appreciate your time.

A: Well, I'm

Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Harold Burson.

A: Good. Thank you. I've enjoyed it, and I hope those who hear it will benefit from it.

Q: Absolutely. It was a great interview. Thank you, sir.

Conclusion of Interview