

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Herschel Auerbach
October 20, 1982
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Herschel Auerbach, conducted on October 20, 1982 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.

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HERSCHEL AUERBACH

October 20, 1982

A. We want to refute the historical revisionists who say the Holocaust never took place.

A. Full name and date of birth? Hershel Auerbach. June 3, 1918. New York City.

Q. At the time of liberation, what unit were you with?

A. I was with the first war crimes investigative unit. I was a captain.

Q. What camps did you liberate?

A. I was in camps after they were liberated, such as Buchenwald. I was at a prisoner of war camp in [???].

Q. Would you start with the first place that you went to?

A. We crossed the [???] in March of 1945 just after the crossing had been developed by the U.S. army. We went to a town that was a POW camp. Most of the POW's were Hindus from India. It was a jail which also had prisoners from France and Belgium. I also went to an institution that had been an insane asylum.

Q. What was the composition of your unit and what was its task?

A. The unit was commanded by a major who was an attorney. There was a photographer, a forensics expert, interpreters, and regular service personnel. The purpose of the unit was to investigate and show evidence of war crimes. We investigated crimes and captured criminals and participated in the interrogation of people who had committed crimes. Hadamar was an insane asylum. It was converted into a place where they first exterminated Germans who were either insane or incapable of being productive. Later it became a place where people who had been forced from Eastern Europe could be killed when they could no longer work. We found shoes and clothes for some twenty thousand people. We had the Germans dig up bones and we did autopsies on them. The cause of death in almost all the cases was an injection of [?????]. We also managed to capture the people responsible. There was a Dr. Klein, a Dr. Waldeman, and a nurse Willy. They thought they were not going to be charged with anything because they were at an asylum. We established facts in a case and turned it over to the U.N. war crimes. The doctors and the nurse were tried in the first war crimes trials and hanged.

Q. What kind of people did you find in that institution?

A. Mostly Polish and Russians from Eastern Europe. Mostly peasants who had been brought to work in the factory or the field. I have some pictures from Hadamar. The first is of the institution itself. The next is of the graveyard which held 20,000 bodies. Here is one of him[??] doing an

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autopsy. I have a picture of the courtroom. The German defense attorney was questioning a witness at this time.

Q. You then went on the Nordhausen?

A. Yes. It was located in central Germany. It was one camp in a series of fifty camps that were scattered throughout the mountains. The Germans had dug tunnels into the mountains. Each was about a mile and a half long and filled with American machine tools. They were being used to produce V-bombs. The camp was at the mouth of the tunnel. They had a practice at the camp to hang someone from a crane over the people that were working in order to spur them on to work a little harder. And they had a crematorium. They had a prison inside the prison for those who broke the rules. They destroyed many thousands of people at Nordhausen.

Q. Was this a secret installation at which advanced research took place?

A. Yes. Workers came in from all over. Nordhausen was the main camp.

Q. At what time did you come in?

A. Just as it was captured. It was a secret camp. The American army didn't know about the camp or the tunnels. There were about three thousand dead concentration camp victims when we came in. We captured the camp with the 69th division. The general put the three thousand bodies in a field and made his soldiers march through them. That unit was the one that finally met up with the Russians.

Q. How would you characterize the camp?

A. It was a concentration camp in which the people that were there were in charge of making V-bombs. What made it a concentration camp was that those who could not work fully were killed right there. The volume of people they destroyed can be judged by the fact that they had crematoriums which were constantly working. They could cremate fifteen people at a time.

Q. What inmates did you find there?

A. Mostly Jewish. But there were political prisoners.

Q. How many did you find when you were there?

A. 25-30,000. Mostly middle age and younger people, some teenagers and a few children.

Q. What did the prisoners do when they saw you?

A. Just before we overran the town, it was bombed. The German soldiers ran away. The prisoners ran away after that. And they ran all over the place. The town, the hills, the woods.

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Those that couldn't run were the only ones who remained. When they saw us they were overjoyed but they were incapable of movement.

Q. Was care and food provided?

A. Yes, obviously. We immediately provided care. We captured a number of doctors and made them care for the prisoners.

Q. Did you speak with prisoners?

A. Yes

Q. What language?

A. Yiddish mostly. I speak it and most of them did. Some prisoners joined us and acted as interpreters.

Q. What evidence did you collect there?

A. Testimony from inmates. We collected tooth charts from the guards. We picked up administration records. Photos of those in charge.

Q. Did you speak with German civilians?

A. Yes. they were from very small towns. In all cases they said they didn't know what went on in the camps. What was the reaction of the soldiers? There were bodies in the crematorium at the time we got there. They did not have time to burn them. The reaction was a strong one. Some got angry. Some got sick. They wanted to defeat the people who had done this.

Q. Would you show this picture?

A. Yes.....

Q. How long did you stay there?

A. About a month. We were not far from Leipzig. We were told of an atrocity in Leipzig so we went to investigate it. There were three hundred and fifty French prisoners there and when the Germans realized we were coming they poured gas on the barracks and burned it. Then they set up machine guns and shot anyone who tried to escape. [Shows pictures...] This guy [in picture] was trying to crawl under the barbed wire. He was a professor. They recognized him from his glasses and his crutch.

Q. Why did the Nazis want to destroy French civilians?

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A. Well, one of the things that was typical was the people in the camps feeling guilty. They were concerned that somebody would testify against them. The only way to avoid that is to get rid of evidence.

Q. Did you find a crematorium there?

A. No. No SS. It was strictly a camp for political prisoners to work in an aircraft factory. There was barbed wire all over the place. In this case it was not electrified. Nordhausen had been electrified. It was taken out by American bombing.

Q. Your investigation took you to other area?

A. Yes. One of the places we went to was [Zeitz]. At Zeitz there was a transport from Buchenwald that was taking people to the east. It got caught up in the advance of the American troops. The SS realized that the Americans were coming. So, they poured gasoline over the railroad cars and buried them, Germans civilians saw what happened.

Q. When you came upon the burnt cars was there any evidence you could collect?

A. Yes. The Germans had put lime on them to get rid of the odor.

Q. Could you tell it was headed for Buchenwald?

A. It was signed Buchenwald.

Q. Did you get to Buchenwald?

A. Yes. A couple of times. [Shows pictures] Most of the people killed at Buchenwald were Jewish. [Picture] The people there put up crosses over the ovens as a memorial. Some of the crosses were made of bones. [Picture] Here you can see the remains still in the oven.

Q. And you found inmates there?

A. Yes. They were still there. This was on about the 16th or the 17th.

Q. Did you speak with inmates there?

A. No. We just went there to follow up on some specific things, then we left.

Q. Did you notice any particular odor?

A. Yes.

Q. What was it?

A. Around the crematorium. There was a terrible odor.

Q. Human beings being burnt? Was it only perceptible near the crematorium?

A. It wasn't working when we were there, so it was only near the crematorium.

Q. So, you made some other discoveries?

A. Once we had overrun the camps we concentrated on POW's mostly. We went to, south of Leipzig. It was similar to Nordhausen. They were digging tunnels into mountains in order to have a place to build munitions. Mostly, they were using American prisoners for that. These were people who were captured early in the war. The POW's had been mistreated. We found Red Cross packages that had been unopened. We found a number of graves where they were shot trying to escape. It said this on the graves and we knew that it was not necessarily true that they were trying to escape. They could have been shot because they were recalcitrant as a lesson to other prisoners. Also, we found that they mixed American dead with those from Eastern Europe. There were many thousands in mass graves. In most cases the cause of death was starvation. We collected what testimony we could. When the Americans got close, they got all of the prisoners into trucks and started to move them south. The fellow who was in charge was a sergeant by the name of Schmidt, and he had a theory that due to dysentery they should not drink water. We followed the route and we would go into cemeteries along the way and perform autopsies. We did catch Mr. Schmidt and he was tried by the American authorities. He was responsible for many American deaths. The Jews and the Poles were just killed and buried right there. It was only the American POW's that they felt a little bit concerned about. We followed Mr. Schmidt and we found his girlfriend. We put surveillance on her, and he showed up one night, so we picked him up.

Q. Did you mention that you ran into Mr. Von Braun at Nordhausen?

A. Mr. Von Braun turned himself in to us at Nordhausen. He didn't want to be captured by the Russians, so he turned himself in to our group.

Q. What did you do after you collected evidence?

A. Several times we went back the SHAEF.

Q. Would you tell us what the acronym stands for?

A. Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force. We went back and spent time there. [3 Or 4 days]. In one instance we did that in June. The whole province of [Hollay?] was turned over to the Russians and we still had evidence to gather. So we went in there on July 4 of 1945. The Russian moved in on the 5th.

Q. Were you still trying to apprehend anyone?

A. No. That would have been difficult because we don't know what that reaction of the Russians would have been.

Q. Was your evidence turned over for use at the Nuremberg trials?

A. It was turned over for specific use at specific places. The Nuremberg trials really tried the top people. One of the people we got was Walter [????], who was the finance minister. The evidence relevant to him we didn't do because it was of a higher level. One thing we did was to have a memorial service so the people would at least remember. [Pictures] The mayor himself was talking and he delivered a Eulogy.

Q. Did the townspeople say they knew what was going on?

A. They knew in terms of the fact that there was a camp. In this particular case I don't think they knew the details. You didn't have tens of thousands going in, what you had was a POW camp. [Picture] -- Here you have ten Americans who had been on this so-called escape. We had them exhumed and reported to the grave registration service.

Q. How did the unit deal with feelings, etc.?

A. Well, it depends on who and what. First of all when you see a great deal of death you are shocked. Then you get accustomed to it. You can't be in a perpetual state of shock. Secondly, when it was people who were not Americans, it didn't mean that much. The initial reaction was strong but you get used to it. I'm not talking about myself but the unit. Being Jewish, my reaction was completely different. American personnel who had been mistreated were reacted to with anger. We wanted to destroy the people responsible. One fellow was a Frenchman. When he saw Frenchmen he got very emotional.

Q. Why is it important to give testimony now?

A. Because these things that happened were not committed just by those who did it. But by the people who didn't do anything about it. The only people who weren't guilty were those who in one manner or another did something about. When we questioned SS guards they thought there was nothing wrong. It wasn't their own people. Just like their actions of our war crimes team.

Q. Do you feel a need to do something to make sure it doesn't happen again?

A. Yes. But what does one do? There is not one type of person or one kind of person that can do this. The French did it. The Austrians did it. The Rumanians did it.

Conclusion of Interview