

JONES, Roberta Arlene Stoeffield
RG-50.106*0013
Interviewed on May 31, 1997
One Audiocassette

Abstract

Roberta Arlene Stoeffield was born on October 15, 1921 in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the youngest of three girls in a poor family, which later lived in Pocahontas, Arkansas, and on a small farm in Oklahoma. Her father owned a grocery store and worked for FDR's WPA.

Roberta graduated from nursing school in January 1944. She joined the Army, was commissioned as a second lieutenant with the Third Army, assigned to a semi-mobile evacuation hospital, and then given basic training at San Antonio, Texas.

She travelled in great secrecy to Luxembourg, where she was stationed near General Patton. He had just come from Buchenwald, and wanted Army personnel to see it. Roberta spent one day in Buchenwald, a few days after its liberation, and handed out food to survivors. Inmates were very happy to see them, and even wanted to share their bread with them.

She and her colleagues saw bodies "stacked high" in the crematoria, gas chamber, and wagons. "There was only silence and shock. It was incredible," she says. When shown a lamp made of human skin in a Nazi administrator's office, her group cried.

Roberta saw two other camps, whose names she did not recall. At one, she and her female colleagues were shocked that the German male political prisoners, naked while receiving clothing, were so "dehumanized" that they were not ashamed to be nude.

She says that a Luftwaffe camp in Linz, Austria was the worst. The women were not allowed to help because others feared that inmates would attack them. There, Roberta was very impressed by French children, "just skin and bones", standing around a bonfire they had built, and singing the French national anthem.

She has shared her war experiences only with her children, and with one person who told her that concentration camps never existed.

Roberta felt that she had to share her experience because "We are the last generation with eyewitness experience, and because there are people who say it never happened...These records must be kept for future generations."

Tape One, Side A

- 0:00:00 Roberta Arlene Stoeffield was born on October 15, 1921 in St. Louis, Missouri. She lived in Pocahontas, Arkansas for a while, then moved to Oklahoma, and then back to Pocahontas. She grew up in a lower middle class family. Her father owned a grocery store, and worked for the WPA during the FDR era. The house in Arkansas was set on fire twice while they were visiting her grandparents. This was a huge setback for the family. Her parents were the most wonderful, loving people. She was not aware of the fact that they were very poor. Her family had a small farm in Oklahoma, where they lived after their house was completely burned down.
- 00:59:00 Roberta's mother was a saint, according to her, her sisters, and every one of her friends. Her father was great, but he bothered only with his family and did not have time for the community. Roberta was the youngest of three girls. They were very close, and continue to be close.
- 01:13:00 Roberta went to nursing school. She did not have the money to even think of going to medical school.
- 01:35:00 She finished her training in January 1944, and applied to be an airline stewardess. At that time, you had to be a nurse to qualify for that job. People in hospitals started to go into the service, mostly to the Army, and Roberta decided to go that route. She was about 23 years old. She wanted to go to Germany, and says she did not know much about the war.
- 01:55:00 Roberta went to San Antonio for basic training. She received a commission, as well as her assignment, before she arrived there. She was a second lieutenant already. The semi-mobile evacuation hospital was being activated. Roberta went to New York by train, and then by ship to England. There was a great secrecy about these trips.
- 02:35:00 It took five days to get there. Then Roberta went to France, and then Luxembourg. After a while, they were attached to a small outfit. They had a lot of German wounded there as well. Roberta then rejoined her hospital. They were following the war as it was advancing; they never retreated.
- 03:40:00 At this point, Roberta was attached to the Third Army. General Patton was nearby. Buchenwald was not too far from there. Patton had been in Buchenwald, and he wanted everyone to visit that concentration camp so the soldiers would see what was going on there, get angry, and become even better soldiers than they were already. Roberta went there for just one day. The camp had been liberated a few days before there. They were handing out food to the survivors. The bodies were still there and so were the crematoria, as well as the gas chamber. No one spoke to each other. There was only silence and shock. It was incredible. They

were then shown the camp. The inmates, still dressed in stripes, were so happy to see them, and help them with whatever they needed. The barracks were wooden buildings, not very large. They were just for sleeping.

- 04:59:00 The trunk beds were four levels high with just a few inches separating each level. To turn over, the inmates had to get up and change position. The inmates wanted to share their black bread with them. "But foolishly we refused, not wanting to take their food away from them, not thinking that they might get pleasure out of the simple act of sharing."
- 05:03:00 They were shown the crematoria and gas chamber. "The bodies were stacked high, and wagons filled with them as well."
- 05:12:00 At one Nazi administrator's office, Roberta was shown a lamp shade and was told that it was made of human skin. "It was a terrible sight to see. It made us all cry."

[Long Pause]

Tape One, Side B

- 00:00:00 Roberta saw another camp at the end of the war, on May 8, 1945. They went to a hospital across the Danube, but Roberta does not remember the name. At the administration building, Roberta saw the inmates receiving new clothing. "They were naked. We were three or four women, yet the men acted as if they were fully clothed. We had to ignore that fact."
- 00:47:00 The men were German political prisoners. "These men were the best minds in Germany, yet they were completely ignoring the fact that they were not dressed. We were surprised and shocked that they were dehumanized to that extent." This was her impression. They seemed to be happy to be alive.
- 01:01:00 The third camp was the worst. It was in Linz, Austria. It was a German Luftwaffe camp. The women were not allowed to work because the fear was that they would be attacked by inmates. A lot of children there, probably most were French. They were lined up at the fence. "Each was just skin and bones." The war was over at that time. A plane was going to take the French people back to Paris.
- 01:30:00 "Everyone was so excited and happy that they were leaving." They gathered all the wood in the barracks, built a bonfire, stood around it and sang the French national anthem. That was very impressive.

- 01:37:00 Roberta and the women were not doing any work. They waited for the men to help the inmates get back on their feet somewhat, and then they were shipped back to the States.
- 01:46:00 “We were not expected to have any emotions. We never discussed any of what we experienced.” Later, Roberta told some of the things to her children as they got older.
- 02:00:00 Roberta felt that she had to tell her children because “we are the last generation with eyewitness experience, and because there are people who say it never happened, and others who refute it ever happened. These records must be kept for future generations.”
- 02:17:00 Roberta stayed in the Army for two years. “We never talked about our experiences. I did think about these things, but did not talk at all.” In Pasadena, California there were badly injured veterans.
- 02:42:00 “They were not allowed to go to the local restaurants because people did not want to see the injured, disfigured veterans. We were very angry about this. We, the nurses, took them out to eat and dance.”
- 03:09:00 In Texas, Roberta worked at Camp Swift and then at Camp Polk, Louisiana. She met her husband while in the army in Pasadena. Roberta stayed in nursing with the army for one more year. She worked in an army hospital as a civilian nurse. This was during the Korean War, and Roberta was in Michigan. Her husband worked with x-rays in the army also. He continued in the army, and worked at Walter Reed. They never talked about her war experiences. Roberta’s son met a person who told him that his mother was affected by her war experiences. But Roberta’s son never mentioned to her whether or not he thought she might have been a different person had she not had those experiences. “I had a woman tell me one time that she did not think there had been any concentration camps; it must be just a lot of propaganda. I told her my war stories and visits to concentration camps, and I felt that she really did not believe anything I said.”
- 04:10:00 Her father-in-law told her that all these stories were just propaganda. Roberta said that there must be a lot of people who don’t believe any of this happened. That is the reason why it is so important to document these stories.
- 05:13:00 When Roberta was in Germany, she met liberated prisoners of war. They had not had good medical care. They were happy to meet an English-speaking woman. They had not had any communication from home for five years.

[There is an abrupt ending.]