

Summary of USHMM audio interview with Milton Shurr  
RG-50.106\*31

Jason DeRose, Interviewer

Date of interview: July 16, 1996

*Volunteer interview call.*

Tape 1/Side A

00:00 Remembers stories in the general press about what was happening in Europe around the time of the second World War. Joined the field staff of the Council of Jewish Federation Welfare Fund in 1941 to inform US citizens about what was happening in Europe. Arranged regional conferences. Moved to Oklahoma City as the head of the Jewish Welfare Fund. He received information in the mail from Europe: he knew people were being moved to camps. Continued to raise money. He was drafted and applied to an officers' candidate school. Classified people into which branch of the military people fit into best. Never went through basic training. Promoted to corporal. He was accepted to officers' training school and moved to Virginia for training. Worked in the Salvage Collections Agency. Went to the school of military government at Ft. Custer and then the School of Western Reserve in Cleveland.

00:15 Military government schools was filled with bankers, lawyers, architects, engineers. These were the people who would be sent into post-war Germany to rebuild it. These people became the Displaced Persons Camps administrators. This pool of officers was moved to England in February of 1944. In England, the corps learned languages and studied government and economics. Knew that they would be re-building cities, but didn't know the extent of the damage or the horror of what was going on in camps. Eisenhower spoke to them in person and told them they were going to be terribly busy once they got into Germany. Heard bombers leaving England on D-Day. Group was slated to go in to France the first week after D-Day. But it took longer because the military decided to move more and more fighting troops in. Landed on Omaha Beach near the town of Isigny. Americans had command of the air, yet Germans sometimes flew over at night. The corps was moved to a field near the beach and they lived in pup tents there. There were about fifty officers there. The First Army requested him to comb the beach looking for supplies thrown off ships. Water cans were the most important thing to find.

Tape 1/Side B

00:00 He figured out a way to make more water cans out of things he found in French garbage dumps. His jeep and driver were taken away from him and he was given a Volkswagen to drive on his own. Secured and brought rations to a chateau full of French women. Continued to find supplies throughout France. Eventually found his way to Luxembourg speaking a little French. Delivered supplies there and returned to Paris. Then he was assigned to a displaced persons camp in Verviers, Belgium near Liege. The DP camp was in a convent. Organized a fairer way of distributing food at this camp. Negotiated and threatened coal from local bergemesiter. The convent was bombed by the Germans while he was there. This was during the bulge of Malmedy.

00:15 He and his driver were often bombed as they were trying to collect supplies for the convent from nearby towns. During this, he acquired hepatitis and was sent to Paris then England to recover. After several months, he was returned to Paris and then rejoined his unit. He caught up with his group in Wetzlar [Lahn (Giesen-Wetzlar)], Germany. Then they were sent to Buchenwald right outside the town of Weimar. There was chaos at Buchenwald. The officers and enlisted men were looting the officers quarters of the camp. People were very confused. There were bodies piled everywhere. There wasn't enough coal to burn them. US soldiers were collecting lampshades made of human skin with tattoos on them. The wife of the adjunct to Buchenwald, Hilde Kockt ordered these made. She would ride out to the onyx quarries and see interesting tattoos on the people mining there and she would order the people skinned and made into parchment. He collected some of these thinking they would be useful to future war crimes investigators. He discussed with the kapos what their bunkers needed. So using a military government stamp, he began to seize supplies from surrounding towns. He paid laborers in cigarettes to load and unload trucks with supplies. The laborers were mostly polish prisoners. He found a supply of shoes and he collected those as well. He mostly interacted with the Kapos. He did not interact with the DP's themselves.

Tape 2/Side A

00:00 Divided possessions found in Nazi quarters among the DP's. There was nothing he could do for a lot of the people. All he could do was feed them. He had no time to help locate the families the DP's. He told them the Red Cross would have to help them. When the Red Cross came, they were put to work relocating people. Prisoners told him about the medical experiments that went on there. He took pictures of the ovens used to cremate people. He toured Germans and Americans through the camp -- diplomats and government personnel. Stopped the DP's from beating up on an SS agent detained there. Life was cheap there. Saw the deep furrows in the stucco walls where prisoners hung on meat hooks would scratch into walls. Assisted the war crimes investigators collect evidence. Collected food and cloth from Bavaria and elsewhere. There were about

15,000 survivors at that camp. April 15 to July 1, he was administering the camp. Then it was turned over to the Russians. Prisoners continues to wear their patches as a matter of national pride.

00:15 Drove into Prague to get supplies. Befriended an ex-prisoner who invited him home for dinner. The Czechs didn't like the Russians. He did a bit of sightseeing while in Prague. In Buchenwald, there was a changeover of prisoners and some women came to the camp. The entire camp stank of urine. Cooking was done in huge pressure cookers. Because he was a top administrator, he didn't really know about the micro-management of the camp. While there, he developed high blood pressure. When there was no more food to find in the countryside, he asked the military government for supplies. They eventually got the food. While he is normally timid, he was willing to be courageous for others' sake. The Russians got mad at him for not giving enough cigarettes to the Russian nationals.

#### Tape 2/Side B

00:00 Visited Jena and the glassworks factory shortly before leaving Buchenwald. He met with some scientists who had been doing serious medical and health experiments. He helped them find the Red Cross who would help them.

00:15 He would write to his wife and tell her what he was doing, but didn't give away anything important. He'd send gifts to her. He was also able to receive letters on a regular basis. He remembers getting off the boat in New York and was demobilized at Ft. Dicks. He worked with a man who know Edward Warberg. He brought back a whip that was later used to demonstrate the cruelty of the Nazis. He was offered a job in Oklahoma City again, but he decided to take a job with the United Jewish Appeal in Detroit. He eventually took a health department and social agency planning in Tulsa. Then took a job with the American Journal of Public Health in Chicago. There, he did community planning.

#### Tape 3/Side A

00:00 There were clicks within clicks in the camp at Buchenwald. The communists were highly organized. They distributed much of the food. And people seemed generally satisfied. Kept artifacts that he thought would be valuable some day and turned them over to the USHMM when it opened. The Seventh Day Adventists at Buchenwald were the servants. They were treated pretty well. Had trouble dealing with people who were more interested in gaining for themselves than in helping others. He didn't speak about the Holocaust until the USHMM was being built. He first talked about it on Channel 9

on local DC TV. The different prisoner groups at Buchenwald were not kept apart, but they lived in separate barracks. People ate about 600 calories per day. No medications.

00:15 The team at Buchenwald was very small, but very well experienced.