

Shurr, Milton,
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3 Audio Tapes

Abstract

Milton Shurr (b. January 28th, 1911) a Jewish American, served as head of the Jewish Welfare Fund in the early 1940s until he was drafted into the military. Following subsequent training and Officer's Candidate School, he was shipped overseas to England, where he worked in preparation for D-Day in June 1944. Following his arrival on Omaha Beach, he was recruited by the Civil Affairs Unit of the Military Government to gather and identify medical supplies left behind on the beach. Following his return to England to receive medical treatment, he returned to France before rejoining his military group in Buchenwald.

Milton's job was to provide food for the 15,000 survivors of Buchenwald, who received additional aid from the Red Cross and the Joint Committee. The lack of the value of life in the camp affected him greatly during his two and half month stay there. All of the evidence available to them was handed over to the Soviets following their occupation of the camp in July 1945.

Having left Buchenwald for Bavaria, Milton was reclassified as a health welfare officer. Here he worked to reopen schools, hospitals, banks, and similar institutions before moving to Munich. During his two years of service in Europe, he maintained correspondence with his wife in America.

Following demobilization in New Jersey, he joined his family before moving to Chicago as an assistant in health planning.

Milton was unable to speak of Buchenwald for many years. But his wife believed that he had a responsibility to share what he had witnessed, so he began to do it later in life, and it proved to be very painful. It was an incredibly traumatic experience.

Tape 1 Side A

- 0:17** In 1941, Milton Shurr joined the Field Staff of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. After a three month orientation in New York City, he moved to Milwaukee, then to Minneapolis to get more orientations from the directors of those Jewish Welfare Funds. They were involved in distributing moneys to various communities.
- 0:41** He married in 1941, and moved with his wife to Oklahoma City. There he was head of the Jewish Welfare Fund there. They learned about the various organizations as well as the problems of Jews in Europe. They raised funds and helped with money problems. Then he was drafted.
- 0:68** He managed to remain in Fort Sill in the reception center. He applied to Officers' Candidate School and was transferred to Ft. Lee, Virginia for training. His wife came along. After six months, he found his way to another company.
- 1:15** From there, they went to Ft. Custer, then to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He was part of the military government, and they were shipped overseas, first

to England in 1944. They were setting up the legal structure for the Army. They were to go into communities which had been destroyed and they were to help rebuild them.

2:62 This was in rural areas or large cities.

2:68 Eisenhower came to speak to them. He told them about similar groups working very hard day and night in Italy, and assured them that when they became busy, they would also work day and night, so they should enjoy the slow time. There were thirty to forty small companies all over England involved in similar activities.

2:89 They were five miles from Salisbury, and they were alerted about D-Day. They went over in a landing craft on the fourth of June...on Omaha Beach. The military governments Civil Affairs Unit requested him to run around for them.

3:41 Medical supplies were thrown around beaches. His job was to find and identify such items as cots, medicines, etc. Others would come in and collect them. Water cans were in short supply in Displaced Persons camps. They devised something for them to use.

Tape I Side B

3:95 They noticed that the German troops used two-wheeled carts which had a pressure cooker on them. The Germans would cook soups on them. The Allies picked these carts up in dumps in France. Milton would get some troops to help him pick up these carts and other things, and bring them to the camps. He was given a Volkswagen to drive to do this work. Then the first army moved to Belgium.

4:82 They headed to Luxembourg City and celebrated with the local people. In Belgium, Milton requested a promotion but they could not give it to him, so he asked to work at a Displaced Persons camp. He was sent to a camp near Liege, Verviers. There were around 400 refugees there. It was in a convent. They needed coal, so they got some the hard way. The Allies forced those in the convent to give them some by showing them Milton's .45 caliber gun. The Germans were approaching.

5:28 On Christmas Day, the Germans were pushed back. It was at this time that Milton came down with hepatitis. He was shipped to England, then back to Rhone, Paris. Finally, he found his group in Germany. He arrived in Buchenwald, outside Weimar. The third army had just captured the camp, and they were souvenir hunting. There was a lot of confusion.

6:32 The enlisted personnel were grabbing lampshades, which were said to have been made of human skin. They also had tattoos. Ilse Koch, the wife of the adjutant of Buchenwald, would ride out to the quarries looking for interesting tattoos on men's arms. Where she found one, she would have the man killed and skinned. She would use the skin for the parchment on the lamps. Milton found a couple of these pieces in a desk drawer, and saved them in a locked drawer. He and his comrades had a fleet of cars and trucks. When they found food, clothing, or any supplies, they took the trucks, packed them up, and took them to the camps.

Tape II Side A

- 0:00** They put all the watches and additional objects on the table, called in the various Kapos, and divided everything among them.
- 0:18** Milton's job was to supply food to 15,000 survivors. Some 300 were dying from malnutrition and typhus. Some people came in from the Red Cross, wanting to know what they could do to help.
- 0:31** They were directed to help the refugees find surviving relatives. The group from the Joint Committee wanted to know what to do to help. There were 2,000 young boys in a barrack, among them Elie Wiesel. They were all helped by the people from the Joint Committee. Buchenwald had originally been a political prisoner camp; Leon Blum had been there.
- 0:45** There were many experiments on humans that took place there. Life clearly had no value, and that affected Milton terribly. In an anteroom, near the crematorium, there were a couple of meat hooks. They would take a prisoner, tie his hands behind him, hang him on the hooks, and watch him struggle. A war crimes group came in about four to six weeks later, and they were given all the evidence that was available.
- 1:16** They were there for two and a half months, and then the agreement was that the Russians would take over. While they were there, they looted all that they could from warehouses, etc., to supply the freed prisoners with food. This action was not legal, but they did it anyway.
- 1:70** They took a Czech prisoner back to Prague with a permit from the Russians. Prague was beautiful, nearly untouched. The Czech people hated the Russians. The Polish prisoners went back to Poland as well as the prisoners from other countries.
- 2:34** The latrines were awful. Cooking was totally primitive. The camp smelled from the odor of the crematoria.
- 2:75** The food supply was very limited. Milton went to headquarters and forced them to send food by threatening them that he would open up the camp gates, let the people go into Weimar, and loot as much as they wanted.

Tape II Side B

- 3:96** At the end of Milton's time in Buchenwald he went to visit the Zeitz factory in Jena. The city was completely obliterated, but the Zeitz Works house was in perfect condition. Research done there was done by doctors and PhDs. They were interested in moving the place and were giving things away. He received a very advanced microscope from them, which he sent to a Belgian pediatrician friend.
- 4:44** They happened on a barn which had been used to assemble military equipment. They also saw rifles and other guns. If they saw something they needed or wanted, Milton and the sergeant with him took it. He got a small car also, which he used as a personal car while in Germany.
- 4:80** They left Buchenwald in July 1945, and Milton was reclassified as a health welfare officer. The Americans were sent to Bavaria. Everything had been neglected in the area. Milton's job was to restart schools, open hospitals, banks, etc. They couldn't find teachers because everyone, or mostly everyone, had been a Nazi, and they could not be

- hired as professionals. They found nuns whom they hired as teachers. The Germans could only function if directed. By giving them exact direction, they functioned perfectly.
- 5:59** Eventually Milton was in charge of fine arts and documents. In a wooden castle, they housed the art collection of several neighboring cities. Finally, he moved to Munich. He had five battle stars which qualified him to slowly edge his way to the USA. He stopped in Buchenwald, and in a convent he met two Jewish boys who were hidden there by nuns. The nuns suggested that the boys be sent back to their parents. He got their address in Brussels, and drove them home to their parents.
- 6:17** He witnessed a German farmer being thrown out of his house with all his belongings. The man and his belongings had been placed on a truck. The neighbors were taking over his farm. The farmer had lived in the area for a long time, but he had come from Russia originally. Milton stopped the eviction. The Germans were totally devoid of democratic behavior.
- 6:52** He was in Europe for about two years. He corresponded with his wife all the time. Sometimes he purchased pieces of china and sent them home. They were demobilized in New Jersey and after a few days he joined his family. While staying with his in-laws in New York, a soldier friend from England came to visit them. He was offered a job but did not take it. As a temporary job, he worked for U.J.A. in Detroit.
- 7:52** A job in Tulsa, Oklahoma lasted about nine months. He ended up in Chicago as an assistant in Health Planning, where he stayed there for five years.

Tape III Side A

- 0:02** In Buchenwald, there were cliques. The communists were organized and they had no control of anything. A Polish officer gave Milton a typewriter and put him in for a medal, which he never received.
- 0:27** At one time, they went into the storage area for binoculars. They put some binoculars together. There were some books and paintings. He picked some up and eventually gave them to the Holocaust Museum. One picture was of a young man, blindfolded, being led into the forest to be shot. In the back of the four pictures was an inscription in German. It read "Only for Official Service." *Mein Kampf* was presented to all couples. There was an aluminum airplane ashtray with the name of the Deputy Chief.
- 0:48** Milton lived in a house by himself. He locked his door for security. They were constantly searching for food to distribute. It was difficult, for they had to deal with the German authorities. When he interviewed for another tape, there were also survivors interviewed. All they talked about were the horrors they witnessed and wanted to know how they could find relatives. They could have left the camps, but they stayed around because they were being fed. He could not even talk to them. He couldn't talk about Buchenwald for 30 or 40 years. His wife thought it was his responsibility to tell what he saw so he started to do so. It was a painful experience for him. After liberation, some of the prisoners put on plays. The plays depicted their experiences.

- 1:21** Buchenwald was mild compared to other camps. The Seventh Day Adventists were used for service. A lot of Gypsies were there as well as gays, who wore pink ribbons and were segregated.
- 1:50** During the war, the prisoners were fed 600 calories a day. That made it possible for them to survive for about six months if they didn't get sick.
After liberation, they could not control their food intake. They could not spoon feed them. They had to be responsible for themselves.
- 2:27** Milton's experience was traumatic and he would have preferred not to have had it.