

Herbert Bitter

Tape 1, Side A

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Abstract

Herbert Jerome Bitter was born on August 4, 1919 in New York City where he completed high school. His mother died when he was five and his father remarried two years later. He had a brother, a half sister and a stepbrother. He felt his stepmother pushed Jewish religion on him too much and he turned away from it. After graduating high school, he worked in the jewelry business until he enlisted in the service and married soon after. He served in Europe, first landing in England, then to France on D-Day plus 10 and ending in Germany. Near Aachen, he learned of a concentration camp, Othelfryn and was the first to liberate it in April 1945. He saw many dead bodies awaiting the ovens and burial but he was not affected until he reached an all-girls slave factory in Weida and heard their stories. Herbert was able to act as translator in both places due to his knowledge of Yiddish. The War ended in Europe and he was put on a ship headed for the War in Japan. Luckily, Truman announced that the War in Japan was over and all ships should head home. Herbert took photos of the girls in the factory and gave them to his grandsons to show at school, gave copies to Yad Vashem and feels he is witness to the Holocaust which should prevent deniers.

Summary

00:00 Herbert Jerome Bitter was born in New York City on August 4, 1919 from parents who were from Romania which is now part of Austria. His stepmother came from Minsk, Russia. They all came in 1913 or 1914. He has a brother who is 84 and lives in Florida, a half sister in New York and his stepbrother passed away about seven or eight years ago. He lived in Manhattan and attended Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn and James Monroe High School in the Bronx. His parents kept moving as they sold one grocery and bought another. His family was loving. His mother died when he was five and his father remarried two years later. During those two years he was sent from one relative to another as he was wild and they did not want him. His second mother was a Hebrew School teacher and forced religion on him so that after his Bar Mitzvah, he quit the synagogue. He did not like being Jewish. He attended an afterschool Hebrew School where the adults thought the children wild as they ran through the halls. He did not like Judaism but in the service he discussed it with the chaplain and started to like it. His parents spoke Yiddish and when he served in Germany, he realized that he could speak some Yiddish and would mix it up with German. He had few non-Jewish friends as he lived in Jewish neighborhoods. Herbert said he did not experience much anti-Semitism.

- 05:00 He thought the whole world was Jewish. Herbert enjoyed track and baseball though he was not a good athlete. He was not close to his siblings. His brother, who is six years older, led his own life and got married 15 years ago. When Herbert got married, he got his own close family and his wife's family. After graduating high school in 1937, he carried bags of jewelry for a salesman for one or two years and then went to work for a jewelry company. Then he went into the service. He did not know anything about Hitler until he read about him in the Army newspaper, the Stars and Stripes. He found out about the torture of Jews in Poland. It did not affect him until he saw a concentration camp and identified with the Jews. Herbert knew that Jews in Europe had trouble as his father tried to bring his relatives over. He was more worried about finding a job and moving out of the house. He moved out at age 21 and got married at 24. After moving out, the draft started and Herbert decided to join to change his life. After he was rejected five times for having a hernia, he underwent the \$250 operation, was rejected a sixth time for his eyesight and finally was accepted the seventh time. At first he was upset that he had enlisted as he was placed in a barracks with 100 men and his bunk was on top just inches from the ceiling. He enlisted in 1943 and was discharged 2 and ½ years later in 1945.
- 10:00 Although he read newspapers, Herbert did not know much about Hitler. He spent his first six months in the service in the States –first to Camp Upton in New York or New Jersey, then to Plattsburg, New York where he got married, then to West Virginia and finally to embark to Connington (?), England. He had enlisted as he was patriotic, wanted to change his life and do something different, have an adventure. His stepmother kept saying that he was Jewish and he tried to be non-Jewish and get along with everyone. He did not suffer any discrimination but the religious guys in his unit who took off Fridays were discriminated against. Herbert spoke to his girl friend about enlisting but not to his parents. He felt that they would not understand as they had no rapport. His father was busy in the grocery all day so he saw him very little and his step-mother helped out in the grocery. One day Herbert arrived home and saw his father in bed. He said he hurt his back and could not move. It was the first time he saw his father in bed and his father said that was because he could not afford to take time off for sickness. Herbert was three months in Connington (?) and moved south to Southampton. He was in the 628th unit of equipment engineers with 100 men.
- 15:00 They used shovels and bulldozers to clear roads. Herbert went over to England with the First Army, transferred to the 3rd Army and later to the 7th Army. They waited a month in Southampton for the invasion. They went over on D-Day plus 10 and it was harrowing. They were bombed and got stuck on a sandbar and got off and landed on Utah Beach. They went inland through the hedgerows. He did not know about concentration camps at that time. His company was under fire and did not worry about others. They entered Germany through Aachen where they saw dead bodies. Then a civilian showed them a

camp where there were dead bodies that did not smell as had been shot an hour earlier. The Germans had left as were afraid that the Americans were coming. He saw bodies in front of ovens and bodies covered with lime at a ravine. Herbert realized what he saw and became a Jew. His unit had been bombarded in France and, during the Bulge, Germans were shot at but he was with the engineers, not the infantry, and moved back into France until the invasion was over. There were snipers firing when he was in Germany but no hand-to-hand combat. He was appalled at first when he saw the dead bodies of Germans but then got used to it except he walked away if there was an odor.

20:00 There were a few Jews in his unit. Herbert had three Jewish friends: two buddies and a Lieutenant. The Lieutenant was in another category but the three did things together. They did not discuss what happened to the Jews. It was since the Holocaust that Herbert became Jewish. He made his son become Bar Mitzvah and his two girls are fairly religious. In Germany, Herbert became an interpreter because he could speak a mix of Yiddish and German. He went to the concentration camp with his friends, Eliot Bass and Abe Cohen. When he first saw the dead bodies, he did not know if they were American or German, civilians or military. He was a corporal at the time. They drove into the camp but, at first, did not realize it was a concentration camp and did not know its name. The Germans left as they were afraid they would be tortured. This was April 10, 1945, the day before Eisenhower, Bradley and Patton entered the camp. There was no resistance as they drove their jeep through the barbed wire fence. They saw bodies lying all over the area and did not know that they were Jewish.

25:00 They went in and saw people yelling in Yiddish. A Polish boy who spoke Yiddish and had a bicycle showed them around. They saw the barracks and the dead bodies and Herbert was appalled. He always carried his camera and an hour later took pictures. He took pictures of the long cottage where they slept. It was like stalls for cattle with a wooden bar between stalls. They were packed with hay and there was little room between stalls. He saw the bodies in front of the oven and about 500 bodies covered with lime near the pit. The Germans had no time to burn them as the Americans were coming and they ran away. Herbert could not understand some of the Yiddish. One guy, who was their KP later, asked them to come to his "zimmer" (room) but Herbert in his fractured Yiddish did not understand as he thought "rhum" was the word for "room." The situation did not hit Herbert immediately but when he met two girls later, he began to understand what had happened. He did not look closely at the recently shot bodies. Later, Herbert researched the camp and found out it was called "Odhurf."

30:00 He was there most of the day and had to contact the civil government of the US Army to take care of the dead bodies. About 25 to 50 men of his company came to the camp and bivouacked nearby. The next day Herbert saw General Eisenhower enter the gate with his entourage of 100 to 200 people. Someone explained the situation in the camp to the general. He also saw General Bradley but is not sure that he saw General Patton.

Eisenhower wrote to Churchill which became a famous quote, "Things I saw beggar description...cruelty, starvation and bestiality were overpowering events which the future must change." People were emaciated to skin and bones but his company did not bring food with them so brought it the next day.

- 35:00 They could not believe that people were hung, starved and shot. All the inmates were anxious to tell him their stories but some were too weak to talk. The girls were explicit in their stories which were all terrible. There were too many to affect him at the time. His buddies did not speak Yiddish so he could relate better to the inmates. He held their hands, sat with them and then left. Then the military government moved in and took care of them. Herbert thought he was the first to enter the camp as no one else was there. The gates were left open. Herbert had already seen dead bodies so he was not afraid of them. **Tape 1, Side B.** From Aachen, they reached the village of Odhurf where the German told him of the camp. Herbert was unsure of the date that he was there since President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, the date he thought Eisenhower entered the camp but Herbert was in Dresden by that date and he believes that he first entered the camp on the 4th.
- 40:00 When Herbert walked into the camp, he saw the barracks to the right, then the ovens with bodies piled up in front and, walking further, he saw a long pit with hundreds of bodies covered with lime ready to bury in the pit. Herbert was 25 years old at that time. Seeing the ovens and dead bodies did not bother him at first as he had seen dead bodies in France. Later after he spoke to the girls of their suffering, he realized it was a Holocaust. He slept soundly that night though he felt bad and had talked to his buddies and realized what a terrible thing it was. Herbert understands that non-Jews would not believe it as it was too terrible. He spoke to Jews and refugees in Europe. He spoke to one refugee, Moishe, who he befriended and served as their KP. The refugee was about 35 years old and Herbert saw him walking along the road, probably in France, and he indicated that he wanted to get to Israel. Herbert gave him an American uniform. Later when they got to Marseilles on their way to the Philippines, they took Moishe by truck to a ship going to Israel.
- 45:00 Herbert never heard of Buchenwald and found out later that Odhurf was a satellite camp of Buchenwald. They went to Odhurf two or three days in a row. When Herbert arrived at Odhurf, he found no dead SS nor allies so presumed he was the first to arrive. He only saw the dead prisoners or those walking around in a fog. It was later that he felt compassion and kinship to them. They left Odhurf and went toward Cologne. By this time, the War was winding down. They came to an area with a factory. An officer came to headquarters and asked if he was Jewish as they found a factory full of Jewish broads but they cannot talk to them. The officer took him to the factory. Herbert mentions the photo he has of the four girls standing in front of the factory. The girls were happy to see

an American/Jewish soldier and took him to the second floor where there was something like a stage with about 100 to 200 girls sitting around.

- 50:00 They asked him to listen to their stories. About 20 girls spoke for two or three hours about their experiences including being raped. He felt like killing someone and asked them what they needed. They asked for siddurim (prayer books) as they had sufficient food. He was able to get three or four books for them and he was their hero. He was their first liberator from the slave labor factory. It was several days from Odhurf and they were on their way to Weida, Germany. At this point, he understood what had happened. He had read about the suffering of the Polish people in the Army newspaper, the Stars and Stripes but it did not affect him then. He was at the factory for two days and then had to move on. There was no chaplain or other person to talk to. Herbert knew that the civilian and military governments were going to take care of the girls. The Germans were happy to see Americans and put white flags outside their homes; they did not want to see the Russians.
- 55:00 The girls' individual stories affected him. They did not wear yellow stars. The Germans were in retreat and were frightened and ran away. Herbert's company was headed to Dresden and stopped at Weida where they bivouacked in a school house where they spent the rest of the war. Then they went to Marseille and were put aboard a ship to go to the war with Japan. He was upset as he had enough points to leave the war. Luckily, Truman announced that all ships should head for the nearest American port so he was one of the first soldiers to go to Newport News. The war with Japan had ended so he was not needed. When he reached the States, he called his mother and told her that he would be home in a few days. He came down with impetigo, a disease you get from dirt, and was placed in quarantine and got home a week later. His family welcomed him home. For a period of time, he did not speak about his time in the service and searched for an apartment to live which was scarce. He thought his parents would not understand so did not tell him of his European experiences but told his wife and children. His children were affected and took his photographs to show in school. At first he did not show anyone his photographs. Later he went to Yad Vashem in Israel and learned that Udhurf was part of Buchenwald. He made copies of his photos and sent them to Yad Vashem.
- 60:00 He shows the photos to his wife who spoke Yiddish and she understood his experience. He did not want his family to relive it with him. Over the years he talked about it. He became more Jewish as realized what the people went through. It built up in him and he wanted to help the Holocaust victims. He did so through a Chavurah (social group) he has with friends and his wife is active in the Dallas Hadassah group. At first it was hard to be Jewish in Dallas. After the war, he obtained different jobs trying to find himself. They had a child a year later. Herbert got a job with the PXs in Europe and then went to Yokohama, Japan for three years. Then he returned to the US and worked as an international manufacturing representative as he was used to traveling. Then he started

his own business which was a success until he retired. Herbert has always remembered what he saw during the War. He visits the Holocaust Museum in Dallas. He has several friends who were in concentration camps and they give talks in the Dallas schools. Herbert believes there are still many who are skeptical about the Holocaust events.

65:00 Some European sites remind him of the Holocaust. In the service, he wrote daily in a diary on a desk that the carpenter made for him. He locked up his desk and left it to be picked up by a truck but he never saw it again. He was with the 628 equipment company in Weida and wrote about Odhurf. Writing was a release for him. When he returned to the US, he learned about the magnitude of the Holocaust and realized what had happened. In Yad Vashem, Herbert learned that Odhurf was just one of 33 satellite camps of Buchenwald. He believes that since he actually saw the concentration camp, its existence cannot be denied. Odhurf is the first exhibit that one sees upon entering the 4th floor exhibit in the Permanent Collection of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. There is a photo of General Eisenhower and the bodies so no one can deny that he was there. No one can prepare themselves to see such sites. It was such a mass scale as Germans were good organizers. At Odhurf, Herbert did not hold the prisoner's hands because they were Jewish but because they were emaciated and needed someone to talk to. He was not concerned about his own health.

70:00 When he goes to Israel, he sees his relatives, his father's family, and talks about what they went through. They left Europe before the concentration camps for Israel where later they did well in business. The first time that Herbert went to Israel, he took two bags of clothing but no longer does so, as they are doing well. His grandsons took the photos to school as they got the message and understand what happened in the Holocaust.

72:00