

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Herbert Bitter

May 19, 1997

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Michelle Keegan, National Court Reporters Association.

HERBERT BITTER

May 19, 1997

Question: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Herbert Bitter, conducted by Gail Schwartz on May 19th, 1997, at the Holocaust Museum. This is Tape Number 1, Side A: What is your full name?

Answer: Herbert Jerome Bitter.

Q: And where were you born and when were you born?

A: Born in New York City, August 4th, 1919.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family background. Where did your family come from?

A: My parents came -- My biological parents came from Romania, which I understand is now Austria. And then my father remarried. My other mother came from Russia, Minsk in Russia. Both came over about -- all three of them came over about the same time, 1914, 1913, something like that.

Q: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

A: I beg your pardon?

Q: Did you have any brothers or sisters? Do you have any?

A: I have one brother, who is 84 years old, in Florida; I have a half sister who lives in New York; and then I had a stepbrother who passed away about seven, eight years ago.

Q: Let's talk right now a little bit about your childhood. When you said "New York City," whereabouts in New York?

A: Manhattan.

Q: And what kind of schooling did you have?

A: I went through high school, and that's as far as I went. Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn and James Monroe High School in the Bronx. Those were the two high schools I went to. My parents kept moving around because my father was a grocer, kept selling one store, moving to another borough, and so on and so forth.

Q: How would you describe your family? Was it a very close family?

A: Not close, but a loving family. My father -- my mother passed away when I was five years old and my father remarried two years later. So there were two years that I was sort of kicked around from relative to relative. And some of them didn't want me because I wasn't a very nice child, actually.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: Well, I was a little wild, a little cantankerous. As a matter of fact, my mother always used to say, "Don't worry, you'll have children." I had a son who was just as wild as I was.

Q: How religious was your family?

A: My mother -- my second mother was a Hebrew school teacher. And the truth is, I got so much of religion that as soon as I graduated -- rather, had my bar mitzvah -- I quit the synagogue. And that was it. That was the end of my Jewish education.

Q: Did you have any other feelings about being Jewish at that time?

A: I didn't like being Jewish. I really didn't. Only because I had so much of it. And I went to a Hebrew school where the old people used to look at young kids as Americana failed. I don't know if you understand Yiddish. Wild animals. Because we went through the halls of the Hebrew school. And I just couldn't wait to get out of there. So my Hebrew education was very, very nil until I got into the service. There, I found out that it was pleasant. We discussed history with the chaplains and I began to find my religion -- not that I was ever religious, but I began to find out a little bit about Judaism at that time.

Q: When you say you went to Hebrew school, was that an after-school Hebrew school and you went to regular elementary school?

A: After-school Hebrew school.

Q: What languages did you speak at home?

A: My parents spoke Yiddish, and of course I never knew I could talk Yiddish until I got into the service in Germany. And that's where I began to speak half German, half Yiddish. That consists of my Yiddish today. And it was only because my parents used to speak Yiddish in the house all the time that I sort of picked it up without realizing I could talk Yiddish.

Q: Did you have friends that were not Jewish?

A: Some. Not too many. I lived in Jewish neighborhoods most of the time, but I did have some.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism as a child?

A: Not really, because living in a Jewish neighborhood, I thought the whole world was Jewish.

Q: All right. Well, let's move on now. Did you have any other interests, any hobbies, any sports?

A: Well, in school I was on track, baseball, the usual things. Nothing outstanding. I was never a real good athlete, so to speak, but I enjoyed athletics.

Q: Were you close to your siblings?

A: No. My brother, who's six years older than I, lived his own life. He was always single. He just got married maybe 15 years ago. He was always with the social bit. And we were never a close family. It was only after I got married that I began to have a family and a close family, my wife's family, my own family.

Q: Now, you've graduated from high school?

A: Yeah.

Q: And what did you do?

A: I went to work carrying the bags of a jewelry salesman. And it was quite an experience, and I did that for about a year or two. And then I went to work for a jewelry company. And for the beginning of my life before the service, that's about all I did, working for jewelry companies, because that's where my experience lie. And then I went into the service.

Q: We're talking now probably around 1937, I guess, when you graduated from high school.

A: Yeah.

Q: What was your knowledge of Hitler at that point, or what was your knowledge of what was happening in Europe?

A: Very little or nothing at all. I only realized -- that's very interesting. I only realized what could be going on in Europe when I was in the service. And I remember sitting in a Jeep and reading the Stars and Stripes newspaper that they found out -- I think it was in Poland, that they realized that Jews were being tortured. And they began to explain to us as to how the torture was going to be. And I read it. And I'm Jewish. And I put the paper away and I went about my business. It never had any effect on me whatever, at all, until of course I went into the concentration camp. And then I became Jewish.

Q: So you were not aware of restrictions in Europe on the Jews in the mid '30s?

A: Some. I mean, I can't say I was completely ignorant of what was going on. I knew that the Jews were having trouble. As a matter of fact, we had relatives in Europe, my father did. I'm close to them today, as a matter of fact. And my father was trying to help them come over and so on and so forth. But I don't know the details because I really didn't care at that time. I was too young. And I was worried about myself. I was worried

about my well-being, so to speak, and finding a job. Those days, it was important to find a job and support yourself and move out of the house, which is what I did.

Q: How old were you when you moved out?

A: Just before -- not long before I got married. I got married at 24. I must have moved out at 21, something like that.

Q: All right. So now you had been working. And you said you moved out of the house. And then what happened?

A: Then the draft came along. I just want to get my facts straight. The draft came along, and I figured that's the greatest way out. That's the best thing for me. I didn't join because I was Jewish or because I looked to save the world. I joined to change my life. And this is the truth. I was rejected six times because I had a hernia. And each time I'd go down there in the hopes that they would let me get in. Finally they wouldn't let me get in, so I went for an operation, a hernia operation. It cost me \$250, which I saved up. And was it the sixth time I went down there? I was rejected because of my eyesight. I was put on limited service. But the seventh time I got in. And as a matter of fact, I remember that first night in the service. I had already met my wife. I was going with her and so on. My first night in the service, they put me in a barracks with maybe 100 other guys, and I was on the top bunk. And there I was, lying on the bunk. And I'm looking at the ceiling, which was like a foot or two away. And I'm saying, "What am I doing here? Who needs this? And I volunteered for this?" And that was my introduction into the service.

Q: What month and what year?

A: 1943. I got out in '45. Two and a half years I was in. I'm trying to think of the month.

Q: What time of year?

A: I guess spring. Yeah, it must have been spring. Early spring or summer, something like that. If I had my discharge in front of me, I could tell. But I don't really remember the date.

Q: And did you have any specific feelings about Hitler or what was happening at that point?

A: No, not really. I just heard about it but very vaguely from -- I read newspapers. I'm an avid reader in that context. And it didn't affect me one way or another.

Q: So where did you first go when you were drafted?

A: I went to Camp Upton, New York or New Jersey, I forget where. And we stayed there -- I was in the states for less than six months. From there, we went to Plattsburgh,

New York, where I got married. And then we came down to Elkins, West Virginia. And then we went right to the port of embarkation in a period of about six months. And I went overseas to a place called Conington, England. Spent a nice time there. Never worrying about what the war was going to be like or anything like this.

Q: Let's back up a little bit. Why did you try to keep volunteering?

A: I was a patriotic American. That's the only reason. Not because -- I had heard things, but it didn't affect me that much. I felt that it was my job. I had heard about Hitler; I can't say that I didn't. But it didn't affect me that much only because I didn't pay too much attention to any of that. And I was in there because I wanted to change my life, for one thing. And for another thing, I wanted to get into the service. I wanted something different. I wanted some adventure, so to speak.

Q: Was your being Jewish a factor in volunteering?

A: Very little. And it all goes back to my mother who kept drumming my being Yiddish, my being Jewish, over and over and over again until I just couldn't take any more. So I tried to be as -- not that I tried to be a goy, but I tried to be as non-Jewish as I could possibly be. And I got along with most everybody. I never suffered any real discrimination, although some of the boys who were in my outfit were religious and they took Fridays off and that sort of thing. And they were discriminated against, not me.

Q: Had you talked in detail with your parents about what was happening -- this is before you were drafted -- about what was happening?

A: Never. This is solely my own doing. The only one I talked to really about it was my girlfriend, who is my wife now. And my parents just wouldn't -- didn't understand. They were European people. My mother, who is my second mother, was just as good to me as my original mother, who I barely remembered. And we had no rapport with each other. I couldn't talk to them. My father was busy in the grocery store. My second mother was there helping him. And I never saw my father, really. He'd go into the store before I got up, come back from the store after I was in bed. As a matter of fact, I remember one time I walked into the house and I looked into their bedroom as I passed. It was a railroad flat. And I looked into the bedroom and there was my father in bed. I had never seen my father in bed. And I looked in. I says, "Hi, Pop. How are you?" He says, "Not so good." I says, "What's the matter?" And I sat down. And it was like almost the first time I ever sat down with him. I says, "What's the matter?" He says, "I hurt my back and I can't move." And then I said to him, "Pop, this is the first time I have ever seen you in bed sick." I says, "I've never seen you that way before." He says, "Herbert," he says, "I can't afford to be sick." What I'm trying to bring out is, that was my upbringing, the work ethic and so on and so forth. But close to my parents, I never was.

Q: Let's jump ahead a little bit. You were drafted and you're now in England.

A: England, a place Conington. We spent about three months there. Very, very pleasant experience. And then we moved down to Southampton, which was a staging area for the invasion of Europe.

Q: What unit were you in?

A: 628th Light Equipment Engineers.

Q: Of?

A: Well, we were switched from army to army because we were a small outfit, about 100 men. And we worked the shovels and the road graders and the bulldozers, and so on, clearing roads and so on. We were doing that in England as well. And we were moved from the -- we originally went over, I think it was the First Army. And then we were transferred as we went down to the Third Army. And then in Europe, I think we wound up with the Seventh Army. I'm not quite sure of these details.

Q: And now you're in Southampton?

A: Southampton, waiting for the invasion. We were in Southampton I guess it must have been about a month until the invasion. And we went over about D-plus 10, 12, something like that. D-Day plus 10. I wasn't part of the initial invasion. But it was a little harrowing. And we got stuck on a sand bar. And finally they got us off and they were bombing us and so on and so forth. From there, we landed on Utah Beach. I didn't even remember the beach until I sort of looked it up for my company. Utah Beach. And then from there, we sort of went inland through the hedgerows and so on.

Q: At this point, did you know anything about what was happening to the Jews or did you know anything about camps in general?

A: Absolutely not. We were so busy embroiled in what we were doing because we were under fire here and there, bombardments and so on. And I didn't have time to worry about anybody else but myself, actually.

Q: What was it like for you to see dead bodies at that point?

A: Oh, that's when we went into Germany. We had gone into Germany through Aachen. I remember that. And somebody said to us, "Hey, fellows, you better get up to this camp. There are a lot of dead bodies up there." A civilian told us. And we went there. And those are the pictures that I show you of what we actually saw. They never even had a chance to pick up the bodies. The bodies didn't even smell yet because they were so new. The Germans had left voluntarily because they were afraid of who was coming. And they took off. And we got there about an hour after they had shot a lot of

the people. And we saw ovens -- I saw them myself -- with bodies piled in front of the ovens. The ovens seemed to be too small for the bodies. But then there was a ravine with a bunch of bodies in that they had spread lime on. And then it began to dawn on me what I was looking at. And then I became a Jew.

Q: We'll talk about Ohrdruf in a moment. Let's go back a little bit to France. Anything else -- any other combat experiences or any fighting that you went through in France?

A: Well, we were bombarded. And during the Bulge, the Germans were really shooting. We weren't an infantry outfit; we were an engineer outfit. And we had to move back into France until the invasion was over, the German invasion was over. And then as they cleared it up, we began to move in. And when we first got into Germany, it was -- really, there were snipers firing at us and so on and so forth. But I was never in any real hand-to-hand or person-to-person combat per se.

Q: Did you see any dead bodies at that point?

A: Oh, all along. In France we always saw dead bodies. I'm talking about dead bodies of Germans. And all the way through, we had seen dead bodies.

Q: How did you feel about seeing a dead body?

A: At first, I was appalled. And after that, strangely enough, you get used to seeing bodies. You don't pay any attention to them. And if there's an odor, you walk over to the other side, but you leave the bodies there. We were just -- it's a matter of survival, really, being in the service under those conditions. And you're worried about yourself. That is, until I got to the concentration camp.

Q: Was your unit made up of other Jews?

A: We had some. We had a few Jews there.

Q: Did you stick together with them or did you mix with everybody else?

A: Not really. I had two basic friends who were Jewish -- three. One was the lieutenant. The other was -- the other two were buddies of mine. And we sort of -- the three of us stuck out together. The lieutenant, he was sort of in another category. And we went places together. We did things together and so on.

Q: Did you ever talk among yourselves about what was happening to Jews?

A: No. And that surprises me. I'm so dedicated now to that sort of thing. I wasn't before. I really wasn't. And it's been since the site of the holocaust, since being in the concentration camp, that I really became Jewish. As a matter of fact, my son didn't want to be bar mitzvahed, but I made him become bar mitzvahed and so on. These two girls that I brought with me are fairly religious.

Q: All right. Now you've crossed over the border into Germany.

A: Well, I think the first town I remember was Aachen. And then we moved past Aachen and we were told about the concentration camp which I just told you about.

Q: Who told you about the concentration camp?

A: A German.

Q: A German person or a German townspeople?

A: Yeah. See, I can understand German a little bit because I spoke a little Yiddish. And I was amazed to find out that I could talk German. As a matter of fact, I became the interpreter between the Germans and my outfit because the boy, "Hey, Bitter, he talks German." I was really talking Yiddish. That's where we found out, and that's where we went to the concentration camp. There were a few of us. I don't remember who they were. I know that my two buddies were among them but I don't remember who else. And then we saw the bodies --

Q: Wait. Let's back up a little bit. All right. This German townspeople tells you that there is a camp. And so what was the next thing that you did? Did you report this to your superior? What happened?

A: No, no. We just -- a bunch of us went to where we -- he said there was a lot of dead bodies there. We didn't know whether they were Germans or Jewish or Americans or anything, so we went there.

Q: How could you leave your unit?

A: Well, we were all spread out. We were in various vehicles and so on. And remember, I was in an outfit with 100 men and we were attached to various divisions. So it was no problem. They just told us where it was, and we drove up there.

Q: What was your rank at the time?

A: Corporal. And we drove up there. And there was --

Q: "We" being who?

A: The two buddies that I had, Jewish boys, Elliot Bass and Abe Corn.

Q: Why did you want to go there?

A: Only to see what was there. We were told there were bodies. And we had to find out what they were, whether they were Americans, whether they were Germans, whether they were -- we didn't know anything about, really, the concentration camps. We did not expect a concentration camp per se.

Q: What was the name or what were you told that the name of this location was?

A: He just told us where it was. He didn't give us any name or anything like that.

Q: How did he describe the location?

A: He says, "There's a camp with bodies 3 miles away up this road." He says, "Why don't you go up there and look at it." See, the Germans were terribly afraid of us. They didn't want to be tortured. They thought that maybe we would come in and torture them. And of course, we weren't looking to cause any havoc. So we wanted to see what the bodies were that were up in this camp.

Q: What date was this?

A: I don't remember the date. It was right after we went into Germany, after the -- better still, it was the day before Eisenhower, Bradley, and --

Q: Patton?

A: -- Patton were there. Of course, they came later.

Q: So this must have been April 11th because they came on April 12th, 1945. Did you know the name of the place before you went?

A: I found out later. And that's one of the things that bugged me because we didn't know where we were, just that we were past Aachen and that there was this camp. And the pictures will show you exactly what we saw as we went through the fences. There was no resistance.

Q: Okay. You are three young soldiers in a Jeep?

A: Yes.

Q: And you are driving up this road. What's the first sight that you see?

A: We saw this fence, which was a barbed wire fence. And as we drove in, we saw bodies lying all over the area. And we couldn't believe it. We didn't even know they were Jewish or anything like that. We just saw the bodies. And then we went in. And there were a number of people who were alive. A number of people. And they began to yell in Yiddish to us. And I understood Yiddish. And I began to talk to them and they began to tell us what went on, what camp it was. And this was all new to us. We had never experienced anything like this. And there was one Polish boy in that camp who spoke Yiddish. And surprisingly enough, he had a bicycle. And he held onto that bicycle. And he was the one that showed us around from place to place, showed us where they slept, showed us where the bodies were. And we were just absolutely appalled. That was a real revelation.

Q: You had a camera with you?

A: Yes. I always carried a camera.

Q: And you so you took pictures?

A: Oh, yeah. It was after an hour or two of being there that we took the pictures because this Polish boy wanted food or whatever he wanted. And he took us around to the camp. And we wanted to see what it was. I had my camera with me all the time. And he took us into a -- these long cottages where they slept. Unlike what I've seen in the movies, these were like stalls for cattle, really. And there was a wooden bar in between the stalls. And they were packed with hay. And that's where they slept. They slept one right next to another. You could barely move in the stalls. And we went up and down. And then we saw the bodies in the -- outside the ovens. I didn't see a crematorium there. I didn't know whether they were gassed or -- we didn't think of asking these questions. And then he took us to this pit where there must have been 500 bodies, something like that, covered with lime. And what they were going to do with these bodies is throw them into the pit because they couldn't burn all of them. They were going to throw these bodies into the pit, but they didn't have time. There was no time because the Americans were there. And they didn't know who we were. All the Germans knew was that the Americans are coming, let's get out of here. And there wasn't a German in that camp as we walked in. But we see the Jews firsthand.

Q: What was your feeling when you first heard Yiddish words from these prisoners?

A: I'm just trying to think. It was -- I wasn't really affected yet, but I began to talk to various -- and of course, there was some communication problem because a lot of the Yiddish that they spoke, I didn't speak. For example, one of the Jewish guys we had with us, we used him as a KP. And he said to me one day -- we gave him a room when we came into this town. And he said to me, "Do you do you speak Yiddish? All right. Komm zu mine Zimmer." He said, "Come to my room." He wanted to show me something because we were Jewish, and so on and so forth. And I says, "Okay. I says, "But was is dat Zimmer?" I had never heard of the word "Zimmer." He says "It's Zimmer," and he showed us. And he took me up to the room that he was staying in. And I says, "You mean a room?" And this is the truth because there are certain idiomatic expressions that pick up the language. I never knew that a room was a Zimmer. And so that's the kind of Yiddish. I spoke a fractured Yiddish but enough to understand what was going on.

Q: How did you feel when they spoke Yiddish and you realized that these prisoners were Jewish?

A: It didn't quite hit me immediately or anything like that, but I began to feel it. And it was only when I met these girls that I began to realize what had -- the bodies, of course, you can't misinterpret. But I began to understand what was going on in this place, what was going on in Germany.

Q: What was the condition of the bodies? Had they looked like they had endured starvation?

A: We didn't look that closely. They were dead, and they weren't dead very long. We assumed that they had been shot. They may have been shot just before we came there. But they couldn't get rid of all of them. And that was not a big camp. It was a small camp. But there wasn't enough time to get rid of all of them.

Q: When did you know the name of the camp?

A: I'm not quite sure. I think it may have been while I was there somebody may have mentioned it or something like that. I'm not quite sure where I learned the name. But I never heard the name after I left until I began to ask people and try to research and find out whether there was a camp like that.

Q: And the name of the camp?

A: Ohrdruf. O-D-H-R-U-F, something like that.

Q: So you learned the name of it, you said, when you were there, that it was Ohrdruf?

A: Yeah.

Q: All right. You have seen these bodies. You walk around. Any other impressions that you can talk about?

A: Well, we were there just a good part of the day. Now, it wasn't our job to remove the bodies or do anything else. We had to contact I think it was the civil government of the U.S. Army. They would come in and take care of the government and so on and so forth.

Q: But you said that there were a lot of other American soldiers already there?

A: From my company. We were the first company to walk in there. There must have been -- in my company, there must have been 25, 40 guys. And of course, the word spread after that that there was this camp. And that's where Eisenhower must have found out about it and so on. But they came the next day.

Q: How do you know that?

A: I saw them. I was there. In other words, we went back. We didn't stay far from them because we were bivouacking, actually. And we went back. And we didn't know they were coming. And all of a sudden the gates open up and an entourage comes in,

maybe 100 or 200 people. I don't know. And of course the bodies had remained there overnight. There was nothing we could do. And they came in and they were looking around and the cameras and all that sort of jazz. And they went through the place. And somebody was explaining to them what had happened and so on. In other words, the hierarchy of the military had come in, and they learned about what happened and they were showing it to the general. And I believe that was the first camp, maybe the only one, that the three generals were there.

Q: So you actually saw General Eisenhower?

A: General Eisenhower, General Bradley. I'm not quite sure about Patton. He was there, but I didn't quite see him. He was sort of walking on his own, more or less. But Eisenhower and Bradley were together. Wherever they went, they were together with a bunch of colonels and military muck-mucks or whatever they call them. And they were explaining to the general what had happened there. They had heard it from one of the boys. So then they repeated to the generals exactly what kind of a camp it was, what it was, and so on.

Q: I'm sure you're aware of the famous quote from General Eisenhower that he wrote to Churchill -- and I'd just like to maybe read it a little bit and see what your reaction is to it -- that he sent in a letter to Churchill after he had been at Ohrdruf. "The things I saw beggar description. The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty, and beastiology were overpowering. I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a position to give firsthand evidence of these things, if ever in the future there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to propaganda." When he said he saw evidence of starvation, cruelty, and beastiology --

A: I don't know about beastiology, but I know cruelty, starvation. That's something I had never mentioned, the fact that they were emaciated people. These people were skin and bones. And we tried to help them, but we didn't have food with us. We had some K-rations and so on. We did the best we could. And that's why we decided to come back the next day, to see if we could be of any -- we didn't know that the generals were coming. And we brought back some food and so on and so forth, but it didn't amount to anything. And we were just appalled by what we had seen. And really, I can't honestly say that it sunk in at that particular time. The bodies, had they not been Jewish I would have felt the same way more or less at that time. And we went through. We were interested in seeing. We couldn't believe that something like this existed, that people could be so cruel as to shoot them, starve them, hang them, which is in those pictures. We just couldn't believe it. And if anybody tells you he realized what it was -- maybe Eisenhower did, but we didn't until it began to sink in.

Q: What did you say and what did the Jewish prisoners say to you? What kind of thoughts?

A: They were all anxious to tell me their stories. Strangely enough, Jewish people love to relate their problems and what had happened to them. And those that could -- a lot of them were too weak to even talk. You know, they told us about where they came from, what had happened to them, and so on. But there were so many stories that one story ran into another. There were so many terrible stories. And they're all most willing to talk. And as a matter of fact, what I really found out more than anything else were the girls. I don't want to get too far ahead. I really found out what really happened. They were explicit and they were able to explain. But as far as I was concerned, we heard so many stories at the same time, all terrible stories. And it's like somebody pricking your finger here, here, here, here, and you couldn't know where it hurts only because there are so many different spots that it hurts. And we had heard so many terrible stories that there were too many to affect us, so to speak. I don't know if you can understand that. But after a while, we began to understand what was going on.

Q: Did your other -- the other soldiers that you were with speak Yiddish, the two others?

A: No. I was the only one that spoke Yiddish, so to speak. And therefore, I was able to relate to some of these people better than some of the others. Of course, a lot of them just didn't understand.

Q: Did you touch any of them?

A: Oh, sure. I held their hand. I spoke to them. I sat with them. We were there for hours. And then strangely enough, here are people who are dying, who -- we picked ourselves up and we left. It's a terrible thing not to realize the degradation that went on and the cruelty that went on. After all, we were in a war. And yet we were able to pick ourselves up and leave. I don't know if I could do that today, leave back to the bivouac area knowing that we were going to come back the next day with whatever we could. And it wasn't very much. But then the military government moved in right after we left, and I guess they took care of them.

Q: How did you know that you were the first Americans to come in?

A: There was nobody else there. I'm sorry. There was absolutely nobody else there. We walked in through the gates, opened up the gates. They weren't locked. Rather, the gates -- the barbed wire gates. We opened them and walked right in. We could see the scenes of the dead from outside the gates. And we just went in. And there was absolutely nobody there.

Q: Were you frightened when you first saw the piles of dead bodies?

A: No. We had seen dead bodies all along. And we came in and we were just curious to know what it was that we were looking at. We really didn't know what we were seeing, at the beginning. And then we realized. I may be contradicting myself but the thoughts are coming so quick and so fast.

Q: This is Tape 1, Side B, of the interview of Herbert Bitter. Before we continue, I'd like to clarify some facts that we talked about on the previous side. You had said that you had come over the border into Germany into the town of Aachen.

A: That's correct. And then from Aachen, I just don't remember where we went because I was completely unfamiliar with Germany.

Q: And then you eventually got to the vicinity of the Ohrdruf camp, and you said you were staying in a village and that a man told you there's a camp 3 miles down the road. Do you remember the name of the village?

A: It might have been Erfurt or Aachen. I'm not quite sure.

Q: Not Aachen. You mean --

A: Excuse me. Erfurt or Ohrdruf.

Q: Ohrdruf. And then the other point we should clarify are the dates when you got to Ohrdruf camp and when you saw Eisenhower. Because it is understood that Eisenhower was there on April 12th, which was the date that President Roosevelt died. Do you have anything to say about that, about when you were there?

A: I certainly do. I believe if I got there on April 4th, which I think I got there, the following day, Eisenhower and Bradley came to that camp. That was the very next day because the bodies were still there as we saw them the day before. And they came and they looked over, and they had a small contingent of people with them. I don't remember who they were. And then they left. Now, the next thing I know is that I saw pictures of the fact that Eisenhower was there. There seemed to be a lot of people there. And the day that Roosevelt died, he was supposed to have been there or Bradley and Patton were supposed to have been there. Now, on the day that Roosevelt died, I was in Dresden. Now, I had seen the concentration camp on April 4th, I believe honestly, so that Eisenhower and Bradley were there the day after I was there. And then they may have come back with photographers and with whoever.

Q: Okay. Before we leave Ohrdruf, I just wanted to ask you again some of your impressions and other sites that you saw. Did you have a sense of the layout of the camp?

A: More or less. As we came in, we saw the bodies. To the right of the gate -- I'm trying to recall because these are things you really don't forget -- were the barracks where the sleeping areas were laid out like in stalls, like cattle, only they were low 2-by-4s that

separated each bunk. And that's all they had. And they were filled with straw. And then we went from there. We saw an oven, and there were a bunch of bodies piled up outside the oven. However, the ovens seemed to be too small to handle the bodies. And as we went further, we saw this long pit where there must have been hundreds of bodies covered with lime. And evidently they were preparing to lay the bodies into the pit so they could bury them and bodies above that and so on.

Q: You are 25 years old, a young man, and obviously not prepared for this. How did you handle this or do you remember what thoughts were going through your mind when you saw piles of bodies and ovens and lime pits and so forth?

A: Well, it didn't quite hit me at that time, only because going through France and the invasion and everything, I had seen a lot of bodies. This was a terrible, terrible thing. And then of course we realized that they were Jews. We felt a little bad. But you must understand that it doesn't hit you suddenly. You're looking and you say "That's a terrible thing." And then you go on and so on. It's only after visiting there, after being away from there that I began to realize. And it was only after I spoke to some girls who told me what they had gone through that I began to realize that this is true. This is a holocaust. And it gradually over a period of time began to sink in.

Q: Did you have any trouble sleeping that night after you saw these sites?

A: No. Peculiar thing to say, I had no trouble at all. Because remember when you're in the service you're worrying about your own being, and nothing is important as taking care of yourself. And I felt badly. I can't say that it just passed over me. We started to talk about it, some of the boys and us, and then we began to realize how terrible a thing it was. That's why when I see people who are not Jewish or people who don't care, they can't believe it. And I can understand why they can't believe it because it's too much to believe. It's too much to take in at once.

Q: Did you feel any kind of kinship with the Jewish prisoners?

A: Always. Because I met Jews throughout Europe, I met refugees, I met a lot of Jews, and I spoke to some of them. As a matter of fact, we had one Jewish refugee that we took with us, and he served as a KP, a kitchen police. He served as a KP for us. And I befriended him and we talked quite a bit, but we never really talked about details. He may not have known about all of these things. He was just a refugee. And we talked quite a bit because I spoke -- I was one of the only people in my outfit that spoke Yiddish, and that's why I was able to communicate.

Q: How old was he and where did you find him?

A: He must have been about 35 years old. We found him walking along the road. And he asked if he could be part of our outfit. He wanted to get to Israel. And we said, "Well,

we're not going to Israel. We're going in the opposite direction." He says, "Can I go with you?" He says, "I have to eat." So we gave him an American uniform. We set him up. Nobody knew who he was. And I communicated with him on a regular basis only because of the Yiddish.

Q: And whereabouts did you find him? What country?

A: I'm not quite sure. It may have been in France, but I'm not quite sure. It's just that he was with us for quite a length of time. And actually, when we came back to Marseilles to go over to the Philippines for the invasion, we had to get rid of him because we couldn't go aboard ship with him. So we had some of the boys put him in a truck, took him down to the shipyards in Marseilles. They put him on a ship that was going to eventually wind up in Israel. And I never heard from him after that.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: Meischer (phonetic). That's as much as I remember.

Q: Had you heard of a place called Buchenwald when you were in Ohrdruf?

A: No. As a matter of fact, I didn't know it was a satellite until I went to Yad Vashem, and they told me it was a satellite of Ohrdruf.

Q: Of Buchenwald?

A: Of Buchenwald. Excuse me.

Q: How many days were you at -- in the Ohrdruf area?

A: Several days.

Q: And how many times did you go back to the camp?

A: We went back the next day and possibly once more. And then we had to move on.

Q: Did you say that you had brought food back?

A: Yes. We brought whatever we could bring back, but it certainly wasn't enough. It was a drop in the bucket. And we knew that the civil police were coming behind us because they had been notified and they had been told about what we had found. I didn't do the notifying myself, but somebody did. And I guess they eventually came.

Q: So just to clarify, you're saying that you were one of the first to come into the camp because there were no other soldiers around?

A: I think we were the first because there was nobody in that camp when we went in. We opened the gates -- the barbed wire gates and we walked in. And this is what we saw. Those pictures that I showed you are what we saw.

Q: Were there any dead SS?

A: No. Only civilians. Only people who were either shot or died in some way, and then the few that were just wandering around the camp with no place to go and nothing to do. They were sort of lost. They were in a fog.

Q: Did you feel any differently after this experience at Ohrdruf than before?

A: I felt a kinship and a compassion. But as I said, it didn't hit me until I had left the camps and I had spoken to some -- the Jewish girls that I had met along the way.

Q: Well, let's move on. So you then were ordered to leave that general area?

A: Yes.

Q: And where did you then move? Did you go eastward?

A: Well, we went toward Cologne because I remember being in Cologne. And the war was beginning to wind down. And on the way -- and I'm not quite sure where this factory was -- we came across a factory. And really, I didn't come across the factory. One of the officers came to the headquarters and said, "Hey, Bitter, are you Jewish?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "Boy, you're going to have a good time." I says, "What do you mean?" He says, "I found a factory full of Jewish broads," and that's exactly the way he put it. And he says, "They can't talk to anybody." He said, "I can't talk to them." He says, "Let me drive you there and I'll pick you up." I say, "Can I be there that long?" He says, "I'll pick you up. I'll come and I'll wait for you." He says, "But Have a good time." He was being very facetious. And we went there and the picture that I brought with me, the picture of the four girls standing outside this factory. And I went up to the, girls knowing that they were Jewish. I said [Yiddish/German expression] which means, "What are you doing, girls?" And they were so excited at the fact that there was a Jewish soldier there. They had never seen an American-Jewish soldier. They had not seen anybody. They knew they were liberated because the Germans had left. And they grabbed me, literally grabbed me, pulled me into the building, and took me to the second floor. And I heard screaming and yelling of the girls. And they put me up on a -- almost like a stage. And there were girls coming from all over the building. I swear to you, there must have been 100 to 200 girls, all disciplined. All sat down. There was one girl who took charge, and she explained to them who I was. And we spoke in sort of Yiddish. And then she said, "I want you to" -- in Yiddish she said, "I want you to hear the stories of some of these girls. I want you to know what we went through." And I says, "All right." And I sat there for the next two or three hours just listening. And each girl, she said, "Yanni (phonetic), get up and tell your story. Myrtle, get up and tell your story." And one by one, there must have been 20 girls, that had -- and they told how they had been raped and taken advantage of and all of that. And I began to feel. I wanted to kill somebody after

listening to these girls. And finally they finished. They said, "Do you want to hear more?" I says, "No. That's enough." And of course, I had to get back. And the officer was waiting for me. So I says, "Maidloch (phonetic), I'll be back tomorrow." I says, "What can I bring you," I says, "in the way of food?" She says, "Food, we're all right on." She says, "But can you bring us a few sidurim," prayer books. And I says, "Well, we don't have many, but I'll pick up every one I can find." And I went back and I got about three or four from the boys in the camp. And I went back the next day with some food, whatever it was, and the girls just couldn't get over me. I was a hero. I was the first liberator that they saw. And I spent a good part of the day with them. I took my own Jeep. And we spent some time, and then I left. And of course, I took a picture with the girls or all the girls. Here is the Jewish girls liberated from the German factory, slave labor. And it was interesting.

Q: Now, can you tell me again where this factory was?

A: It was after Aachen. And I cannot remember the distance. I can't remember the factory or what they did in the factory, as a matter of fact. But the whole building was full of girls. Only girls.

Q: How much later after Ohrdruf did you come across this factory?

A: Several days.

Q: And were you heading eastward or westward?

A: We were heading eastward. We were heading eastward toward -- we wound up in a place called Weida, Germany, which was in the Russian section. And we spent quite a bit of time there. And then of course we doubled back to go to Marseilles.

Q: And you don't know what kind of factory it was?

A: No, I have no idea what they made. They were so busy telling me about their experiences, not what they were, not -- but they wanted people to know how they suffered. And believe me, they let me know how they suffered. And it was then that the whole thing was coming together, that I began to realize what was going on in there. It's not one incident that sets you apart. It's all of these incidents together. And you begin to realize there's a pattern there. And that's what I began to realize. As a matter of fact, I myself -- I don't know if I told you, I was sitting in a Jeep in France. And they had liberated some camps. I think it was in Poland or somewhere else. I don't know. And I read the article in Stars and Stripes. And I read about how these people suffered. And I closed the Stars and Stripes, put them away, and I went about my business like it didn't affect me in any way. It does affect me now.

Q: How long did you stay in that area of the labor factory?

A: Two days. I was there the first day. I had to go and get on with the outfit. So I was there the first day. And then the second day I came back by myself with the sidurim. And I spent a good part of the day. I had my own Jeep. And then I went back to my outfit. And that was it.

Q: Did you talk about this with the -- Was there a chaplain that you could talk things over with? And if so, did you?

A: No, because we had to move on. There was nobody I could really talk to because we were an individual outfit. We were -- we had to be attached to various armies to do the work for them and so on and so forth. So there was nobody I could talk to. And I knew that behind us was a civil and military governments who were cleaning up and taking care of whatever we saw. And of course, the Germans didn't know any of this was going on. None of it. And they were very, very happy to see the Americans because they didn't want to see the Russians. So they were very, very happy to see us and welcome us. And they had white flags outside of all the buildings. And it was a very, very nice thing.

Q: Why do you say that your experience at the women's slave labor factory made an

A: Because they were individual stories. "It happened to me," they say. "This is what happened to me." And then another one said, "This is what happened to me." And when you hear so many individual stories, not a group of people talking with one story, there are a group of people talking with many, many stories, that has to affect you even if you're not Jewish. And it affected me.

Q: Were these women wearing yellow stars?

A: I have to look at the picture. No, they weren't. Evidently the war or the Germans were in such retreat that they weren't afraid any more because the Germans had left. They were frightened, they didn't know what was going to happen to them, and they began to run. And basically, they weren't wearing stars.

Q: And then you left this factory. And then where did your unit go?

A: And then we went on to Dresden, as I mentioned before. And we wound up in a place called Weida, W-E-I-D-A: And we were bivouacked in a schoolhouse, and we spent the balance of the war there. That's right. Because we had to go from there to Marseilles. And in Marseilles, we were going to be put aboard ships and go to the Philippines for the invasion of Japan. And I had enough points to get out and I was very mad and we were very irritated and so on and so forth. But while we were there -- we got aboard the ship, and we're all -- pardon me -- bitching. And the ship took off. And this was after Roosevelt had died. And Truman took over. And while we were aboard the ship, Truman declared all ships that are headed for foreign ports, military ships, to turn back and go to the nearest American port. And I was one of the first troops to get home

after we hit Newport News, Virginia: I was one of the first American soldiers that came in. Excuse me. The war in Japan had ended, so they felt they didn't need us there any more and they didn't want to any more troops than they needed, so they sent us right back to Newport News. And I called my family and I told them I'm home. They never expected me to be home. Only my mother said, "Don't worry. He'll come home." And I did. And I called the house and told them I would be home in a few days. They told us they'd give us leave. So I said, "I'll be home in about two or three days." Unfortunately, I got what they call impetigo, which comes from dirt and filth. So they had to change my uniform and put me in quarantine. And my family had put up a sign, "Welcome home, Herbie." And they had to change the sign because I didn't come back until a week later. And it said, "Well, come home, Herbie." And that was it basically.

Q: When you got home, did you talk about Ohrdruf with family? Did you talk about the labor factory stories?

A: No, we didn't talk about much of anything. It came out over a period of time. I may have mentioned it but never any details. I didn't want to talk about my time in the service. I had so many other things that I wanted to do that I wasn't going to start -- actually a new life. I was already married. I was married in Plattsburgh while I was in the service, which I didn't mention. And I was busy looking for a place to live because in those days you couldn't find an apartment at all in New York. And it was only gradually. I never spoke about that to my parents, for some reason or another. Never. I sort of felt they wouldn't understand. I may have mentioned one or two things, but I had spoken to my wife. She would be the only one. And my children. My children were the ones that were affected by this more than anybody else through me. And every time they went to school and they spoke about the holocaust, they insisted on taking the pictures. That's why I have so few pictures left. And they were more affected. That's why my daughter called you because she had heard these stories over the years.

Q: Did you show these photographs that you had? When you first got home, did you show them to anybody?

A: No, not really. The only people that saw them was when I went to Israel and we went to Yad Vashem, they asked me -- when we found out that it was part of Buchenwald and so forth, they asked me whether I had pictures. And they said, "Would you send me pictures?" And I made copies. Somebody had a machine that made copies, and I sent them the copies.

Q: Did you show your wife these pictures? I'm talking about in the 1940s. I'm not talking about later. I'm saying when you first came home. Did you show your wife the photographs?

A: She had seen them, I'm sure. It's just that I don't know the period of time that had elapsed. I wasn't hesitant to talk about it. I just didn't want to go into any detail, basically. So my wife saw all the pictures. And she speaks Yiddish pretty well so she understood basically what I went through. And I didn't talk about any gory details because I wasn't interested in my family reliving it with me or anything like that.

Q: Why not?

A: Because I had lived it. They had seen the pictures. They knew what I went through over a period of years. We had always been talking about it. And I didn't sit them down and tell them -- first of all, they were too young, but it was over a period of years that we talked about it, we discussed it and so on. So they know everything that I went through. It's just that we didn't do it in one session or anything like that.

Q: Did what you go through affect -- you had alluded to this before -- affect your feelings about being Jewish?

A: I became more Jewish.

Q: Why?

A: Because I began to realize what these people had gone through, and I began to see with my own eyes. And I told you, over a period of time it just sort of built up in me until I really began -- any chance I had to help holocaust victims or whatever it is, we did. And we're very active. We have our own chavurah, which is a group of friends that get together that are all Jewish. And my wife is very active in Hadassah, in all the Jewish organizations in Dallas. And it's a difficult place to be Jewish, in Dallas, a difficult thing to be Jewish in Dallas, especially when we first moved there. So she's very active there.

Q: Can you just summarize what happened after the war, professionally what you did.

A: After the war, I got myself a job and another job and a third job. You know, I was sort of trying to find myself. At the same time, I had a child a year after I came home. But then I worked for a large jewelry organization, and then I got a job with the PXs in Europe. And we went to Japan with my family. We lived in Japan for several years, belonged to the Jewish Community Center in Tokyo. And we lived in Yokohama, and we spent three years in Japan. I came back, went to work for a company that was a manufacturer's representative all over the world because I was used to traveling. I'm just trying to think -- Let's see. Yeah. After that, I went into business for myself, made a success of the business, and retired several years ago. And basically, that's the story of my life.

Q: Do you still think about what you saw, the sites that you saw?

A: Always. It takes the slightest thing to remind me of what I saw.

Q: Such as what kind of things remind you?

A: Well, when I hear about the holocaust -- and in Dallas, in the Jewish Community Center, they have a holocaust museum. Nothing like this. But I go down there once in a while and look at the pictures. And a friend of mine -- I have several friends who are refugees who were in concentration camps. And they're constantly talking about it and so on. And they make various talks throughout the schools in Dallas, trying to have people to be cognizant of what went on and so on, but there are still a lot of skeptics.

Q: Are there any sights that trigger what you saw? Any sights that you see today that would trigger anything about Ohrdruf?

A: Excuse me. Mostly Europe. When I see certain areas in Europe, I think of the holocaust. I think of what I saw. I'll never forget what I saw. In fact, what I've told you these are the only basic things that I remember, but so much more happened and so much more that I went through that I can't remember. And I wish I could. That's why before I came to see you I wondered what I'm going to say to you. I didn't realize I knew this much.

Q: You said you had kept a diary when you were a soldier.

A: I had a diary. I had a little desk that the carpenter in the outfit made for me. And each day I wrote into this diary. And then for some reason we had to leave quickly, so I locked up the desk because I couldn't carry it with me. And they were supposed to be picked up by a truck. I never saw that desk again.

Q: Where did you lose your desk and your diary?

A: Probably in -- we left from Weida, Germany, I think. And it's with the -- whatever is left of the 628th Light Equipment records. It should be within that, and written by me.

Q: So you wrote about what you saw in Ohrdruf in this diary?

A: I wrote a lot of what I saw. And I don't remember exactly when I stopped writing. I just remember the desk was gone. I thought I would see it when I got to Marseilles, but I didn't.

Q: Was it a release for you to be able to sit down and write about what you saw that day?

A: Yes. I began to realize what I had saw -- seen, but for some reason or other it did not sink in until days, weeks later.

Q: After the war and you were back here in the United States and word came out about the camps and there were more and more pictures, how did you respond to that when you saw the magnitude?

A: That's when I began to realize. That's when I began to understand what was going on. And the sights plus what I began to read about it all came together. And suddenly I began to realize what this was all about. You just can't look at it one time and say, well, this is a terrible thing. It isn't that simple. It's something that has to build up within you. And now nobody can tell me it didn't happen or I don't believe it. I know I saw it. What I went through just trying to find out whether there was such a camp. At first I began to say there had to be an Ohrdruf. I was in there. And everybody in Dallas, they told me no. The first trip to Israel they said they don't know of such a camp. And you know they have all the camps laid out on a map. Never saw Ohrdruf until I went into the Yad Vashem. Until they showed me the books. And they had the history of the camp there.

Q: And it's a subcamp of Buchenwald and referred to as S3?

A: Yes.

Q: The first photograph that one sees in the permanent exhibit here at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a picture of Ohrdruf. Do you feel that's appropriate?

A: I don't quite understand you.

Q: When the public comes to the permanent exhibit here at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and they get off the elevator, the very first photograph is of General Eisenhower at Ohrdruf and the scene of the bodies at Ohrdruf. How do you feel about that?

A: I didn't see the picture, number one.

Q: But the idea that that's the first one.

A: Oh, yeah, because I knew he was there. Nobody could deny it, the fact that Eisenhower was there on the second trip, I believe. Nobody could believe that this thing went on and yet people will still look at that picture and say, "It can't be that bad." They still do that today.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

A: No, nothing. If my memory improves, maybe I'll come back again.

Q: Do you think you could have been prepared by anybody else for the sights that you saw?

A: No, absolutely not. Nobody -- I've told you, I read it in the Stars and Stripes. Not that I didn't believe it. It just didn't sink in. And that's what happens -- and I'm talking about Jewish people as well. And everybody seems to say, "Well, it's not that bad. It can't be that horrible. There are a few bodies and there were some mean people there." But it

existed. And it existed on a mass scale because I saw how organized that was. And believe me, the Germans know how to organize anything. And they organized that.

Q: You said something that was very touching, which was when you went into Ohrdruf and you spoke Yiddish to some of the survivors and you sat down with them and you held their hand. Why did you do that?

A: Well, only because I was curious to know what went on. We knew so little. There was no history, you know, when I went in there. We knew so little. So as I spoke to them, I was holding one of them and because he was an individual, not because he was Jewish, not because he was anything. But because he was a man who had suffered and who had been hungry and who was emaciated looking. And these are men that needed somebody to talk to them. It's just that I couldn't stay there too long. That was the only thing.

Q: Were you ever concerned about your own health in these camps with diseases and so forth?

A: No, not at all. We didn't think of any. We just saw what we saw. We saw what was happening to somebody else, not to us. And we looked and we saw. And it was just -- it was a terrible sight. I only wish I could have realized it then, but maybe I wouldn't have slept. Maybe I would have been upset. Maybe I would have become a nervous wreck. So maybe nature has its way of compensating. That could be it. Of course one more thing. When I go to Israel, I see some of my relatives, my father's family. And we talk about it. And we talk about it, and we talk about what they went through. And they had left before the concentration camp business. They all went to Israel. And they all became very successful doctors and so on and so forth. And we discuss it very rationally. They don't prefer to talk too much about it because they're doing well and they don't want to be reminded. But they went through quite a bit as well. And I remember the first time I went to Israel we took two bags of clothing to bring to them. Now they don't need my clothing. They're doing very well.

Q: Any message you want to give to your grandson or any special message to your family?

A: The truth is that my grandsons got the message by virtue of the fact that I gave them the pictures to take to school. My children, my grandchildren all took these pictures to school. And what they did in school and how they reacted, they all know exactly what happened.

Q: Well, thank you very much for doing the interview. This concludes the interview of Herbert Bitter.

Conclusion of Interview