

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with George Leonard, and this is tape three, side A.

When you were physically in the camp, did you have an opportunity to see the parachutist cliff or the death steps or that part of the camp that has become notorious?

The parachutist cliffs doesn't ring a bell, and I feel inadequate-- the so-called death steps, sure, I saw them many times, and I was familiar with them, although if you were to ask me right now what quadrant of the outside of the camp they were in, I wouldn't be able to answer. Yeah, I saw them, and I saw people scrambling over them because of the historic importance.

And later in the game, I saw photographers from all sorts of news groups and so forth taking pictures, but not parachutist cliffs. I just don't remember it. I remember the road going in the direction of the-- well, I remember that the railroad station where the freight cars came in and they'd be taken up to the camp-- if you want to steer me here, you can do so.

Just whatever you were-- remember whatever came to mind. But if something more comes to mind, you can add it anytime. That's fine.

I wanted to get back to something that you had alluded to earlier in the interview, and you had talked about the Russians that were prisoners being very active and being in charge. How did the different ethnic groups within the camp get along during the period of time when the Americans were administering the camp?

During the time that--

Yeah, while you were there.

There were squabbles constantly, and the importance of the American presence was shown in that. The camp gradually, as two or three weeks rolled by, became quieter. And people went about their business more to accomplish jobs and so forth. And you had people in the camp, the healthy ones, were buckling down to communicating and solidifying friendships with their own groups and others.

And I think that the only major antipathies that I remember clearly and was a witness to were the kapos being set upon by the ordinary inmates and the Russians against the rest of them-- the Russians against the rest of them primarily because they wanted to be boss. They were the biggest group, et cetera.

And the Russians hated the Jews. There was that, too. And you had enough of a preponderance in the rest of it.

Like I said, probably 75% to 95% of the remainder, outside of the criminals and the Russians, were Jewish. That's my estimate. I talked with vast numbers of them and looked over vast numbers of them. And I was experienced in coming to the conclusion that this was primarily, outside of the Russians, a death camp for Jews.

And I'm on good ground here when I say that not many people know it, or they don't care to know it, but Hitler was a profound dabbler in the occult. Did you know that? And he had someone advising him. It was a pure nut, I think.

And in this occult, he dabbled with this rather silly, unsupported information about Jews. And I really shouldn't carry it any further than that because what I just said, I know, but I don't want to say anything I don't really know.

Another thing that you had mentioned before, very briefly, in passing, was that you looked around and you took it in, but you didn't process it yet. My next question has two parts. How long were you physically in that area? And how did you begin to process during the time that you were there in the camp, in the area around Mauthausen?

I think it was in late July that we were moved to-- mid-late-July, we were moved to Spital am Pyhrn in the mountains,

which, by the way, was a delightful experience. So we had something like five to seven weeks, I dare say, in the Mauthausen area.

I got to add a statement about Spital. We were billeted in Spital with a rushing mountain river at the eastern edge of us. And just to the other side of that eastern edge were the Russians. So there was a reason for that, too-- first of all, to prevent the Russians from coming down in. And secondly, maybe we were going to use that as a venue ourselves to go out and go east. But there it was.

I remember I used to be a damn fool. I did some awfully foolish things. I used to go all alone onto the road, going into their territory, and just take long walks talking with any Russian soldier who could speak English. And I found them to be amiable and ignorant-- ignorant in the ordinary sense of the word, meaning not well versed in things.

And I used to hate them. For one thing, they'd throw hand grenades in the river, and the trout would come belly up. And I love trout. And you just don't do that to trout.

During the five to seven weeks that you were in Mauthausen, how did you begin to process what you had found in the camp? You said you just took it in and you didn't process it when you first arrived, but you were there for weeks and weeks. How did you begin to deal with the reality of what you had found?

I started taking notes. And I don't have them anymore, I'm sure. I took voluminous notes that I have. Even if I could find them, I don't even think I could read them. They were taken in such a bad handwriting which I have. The teachers changed me when I was in kindergarten, the left to the right.

And when I was in Kitzingen, I really took up the idea of-- Kitzingen was in the 79th Infantry Division on my way home. And I had a few weeks there, and I had access to a typewriter in an office.

And I used to go in three hours a day and try to-- once I started a novel. Another time I started a non-fiction book. And I couldn't take it even back then. Gradually, I just drew off from it.

But in answer to your question, I processed it by trying to write about it and collect it in my mind and so forth. And it just didn't work. And I tried two or three times over the years to write a novel or a non-fiction book on the subject, and I can handle-- maybe not like some of the finest writers, but I can handle fiction and nonfiction well enough so that I should have been able to. But emotionally, I couldn't do it. I just had to duck off.

You can't avoid processing, because your mind takes over. Your mind-- your subconscious mind and your conscious mind-- are working all the time. And you think about things, and you think and think and think.

I had another way to process, and that is I got tied up with a girl from Vienna, a schoolteacher named Bertha [? Bittel. ?] And she-- Phyllis knows about her, so there's no problem. And Bertha [? Bittel ?] was a product of a Nazi childhood. But she asked questions and wanted to know, and it was the fact that she of her background that led me not to get serious enough to make plans with her.

But at any rate, she wanted to know. She'd ask me questions about it, about the Holocaust, about Jews. Is it really true that blah, blah, blah, blah, blah? And I'd say, Bertha, and we'd talk about it. So she spoke good English because one of her subjects was teaching English. And I'll tell you something amusing about that. May I?

I used to go to Vocklabruck to see her, which is a beautiful town on a little river, not too far away. And there was a supply truck that left our town, particularly of Spital, when I was there, to go into Vocklabruck. So I used to hitch rides with them and see her because I had always-- first of all, I went with them to do a job and I met her on the bank of the Vocklabruck River.

From then on, I used to hitch rides with them and get a ride to see her. And just before I was about to ship out, I knew that I was going to-- no, before that, I knew I was going to-- well, I wanted to see her, and I had no truck. And I took a jeep, and I overestimated my sense of worth and power in the company and took the jeep and went to see her and have a

great weekend.

I got back, and the first sergeant, who was not a friend of mine and who had been behind the whole war and then came up at the end of the war, said, I'm going to see that you get shipped out to a group that's going to Japan. So I went to the captain. I said, are you going to let this happen after we dug foxholes together and everything? Certainly not, he says. Tell the sergeant to give you two days' extra duty and let it go.

So I did that. But then the outfit I would have been shipped to Japan went home when the war ended, and they all got discharged weeks earlier-- just a little sidelight.

I was hoping you could also speak a little bit about the reactions, not just of yourself, but of the other Americans that were there, the other GIs, especially if there were any Jewish GIs. Did you have any conversations among yourselves in the face of what you found at Mauthausen?

I don't recall specific conversations because it just wasn't done. Even if you worked side by side with somebody, looking at a bad situation, there might be a quick passing statement, and that was all. You just went ahead and worked.

I can tell you, though, according to the factions I was telling you about that were split up entirely, a lot of the ASTP guys were more empathetic, and-- army specialized training, the colleges-- more empathetic and feeling, and knowing how this fit into the world, et cetera, et cetera.

One of the most selfish lot I found was the new young kids coming in who would just come in from replacement depots. And they hadn't seen much, if any, combat. And I didn't know them because I was with the captain, mostly, and they'd be replacing someone in the third platoon, blah, blah, blah. And I wouldn't even get to see them much. If I went to the third platoon, it was to talk to the sergeant or the lieutenant.

But in Mauthausen, I saw a few of them. And one of them was a guy who found an SS horse. And all that was on his mind-- nothing to do with the camp, nothing to-- he could have been anywhere. He could have been in Maine or Vermont. He just lived the horse, and he was a very self-centered guy.

And another one, the same type, lived in a house next to me, and he was a young man who was a fatuous jerk who would say things to the dentist's daughter like, Hilda, Hilda, I'm a Catholic, too. You know what I mean?

No understanding of the fact that these daughters and the family lived there right in the shadow of Mauthausen, and the father probably worked on SS teeth and so on and so forth and probably pried gold out of the Jews' teeth, for all I know. But there was no realization of anything like this at all, this kind of a mindset. And there was a lot of that mindset among the young fellows coming in.

Let me see if I have another group there that I want to talk about-- replacements, ASTP, the original cadre, and the sociopaths. I've already talked about that. I told you about the guy who came up to the line them up and shot prisoners whenever he could, [? Wachter, ?] didn't I? And I told you about [? Labede, ?] who was a sociopath. I hate to use that word over and over again, but it fits them.

Aside from the things that were given to you by some of the people there, did you take any artifacts, or did-- not just you personally, but did the other GIs, did they take any artifacts or anything like that? And the other part of the same question was--

From the camp, you mean?

From the camp.

There was nothing from the camp to take, really. I was given a present by a Pole, a cigarette thing. But I don't imagine that there was much of that that went on. Who had much personal-- you know?

Did you happen to see the American flag that some of the women had made for the Americans?

No, it was a surprise to me.

Did you-- you never saw it?

No, that was a surprise to me. You told me about it or I saw it written or something. Oh, when you gave me your notes, yeah.

In a totally different vein, were you aware of the subcamps, the other camps around Mauthausen, and did you see any of them?

Yeah, I was aware of quite a few of them. And I went to Gusen once and found out that it was a predominantly a work camp, although they did not have it nice, of course. But it was a work camp, and the end result there was not death unless they didn't behave and work, in which case they might have got shot in the head or the back or something.

There were other camps around, work camps were of a lighter nature than that and Bertha and I used to walk around to one particular camp because there were a lot of Poles in it who had accordions and other musical instruments.

And they used to have dances in the evening, and it became quite a joyous place to go. Bertha and I used to dance a little bit there. I don't think I can say anything more about the surrounding camps except to say that they're just like you read.

Did any military brass or investigative teams come and visit the camp that you're aware of?

Galore. In the ensuing days and weeks, every sort of group imaginable came in. I saw and talked with Red Cross groups. I saw and talked with other kinds of voluntary groups giving food and help. I saw a commission from SHAEF headquarters, Eisenhower's quarters, come in. I never had a chance to talk to them, of course. Then, of course, there were all the repatriation teams from the different countries.

The camp became very quiet after a few days-- after a few weeks because, when you moved out, a few vast contingencies-- you would get down to the nub of the still-existing serious cases. And I'm trying to think of the second group that moved out after the Russians. I think there were some Polish nationals in that group, too. There weren't necessarily Jews.

And there were some groups who were-- there was a small group there who had fought and the Russian army but who were Jews. And they took it on the chin in the camp.

When you say they took it on the chin, you mean during the war or after, during the period that the Americans were administering it?

I can't speak about during the war. I can only speculate. But after the Americans came in, there were two problems. The main problem there was that after liberation, they could be and in some cases were victims of Russian authoritarianism and hatred.

What happened before we came in with those Jewish Russian prisoners, I only heard, and I can speculate that they were treated badly. And some of them were thrown over into the Jewish category and not Russian Jewish.

Two questions have come to my mind. You mentioned relief organizations that came to help besides the Red Cross. Can you remember specifically any other organizations that came?

It was one big group with a big name in America. And I don't recall whether the Ford Foundation existed then or not or one of those others, but it was an American group. Did the Ford Foundation exist then?

I'm not sure. I'm sorry. There was an American, privately-funded foundation that was there. There were Jewish groups

there. There were--

Did any other nation send-- besides repatriation groups, did any other nation send any assistance to the Americans in the administration of this camp, to the best of your knowledge?

My first answer is I didn't see any evidence of it. The second answer is that there was small amounts of help from Switzerland. And you know about the Hafliger case, don't you? Didn't I tell you about that?

Some Swiss named Hafliger with the Swiss Red Cross, some weeks before the war ended, had been sent by the Swiss Red Cross with seven or nine trucks, Hafliger heading it up, to go to Mauthausen and do what he could to, quote-- and I have the exact quote upstairs-- do what he could to ameliorate the situation, et cetera.

It became a ridiculous situation. Nobody expected what would happen at all. But the commandant tried to surrender the camp to Hafliger and then Hafliger had some weird ideas of-- I guess it got to him-- his own ideas of being a big leader there or something.

And the commandant swore up and down that he'd give up the camp if only he'd get grace after the war ended because the war was approaching an end, et cetera. None of that worked out, and I think that Hafliger crept away with his tail between his legs.

But it was a weird situation and a beautiful situation for someone who has a lot of energy and a good writer to dig it out and come out with a best-selling book, non-fiction. I'm serious. It would really go.

Was the liberation of Mauthausen uncovered by reporters for Stars and Stripes or any other publication that you were aware of?

Stars and Stripes, certainly. Someplace upstairs, I've got some stuff on it, but they're usually superficial and just revert to the same old stuff of another death camp, et cetera, has-- although one of them did make the point that it was among the worst that they had seen, but I don't recall who said that.

During your time in Europe, with the fighting and everything else, how easy or how difficult was it for you to get your hands on an issue of Stars and Stripes?

During the war-- during our coming across, we got our hands on nothing. We were 50 miles ahead of any civilization that was close to us most of the time. When we had a week break in Belgium, some of the stuff came to us, but then we were fairly close to civilization. In Worms, a little bit, but from Worms on, it was a blank. No mail came up, no nothing.

Did I tell you about that guy I was going to tell you about? I started, a few minutes ago, to tell you about a young man who was in army specialized training with me-- a very bright guy and normal in every respect, a decent soldier, et cetera. But I couldn't understand him, and I'll tell you why.

In the anecdote I told before about coming down the hill with the smoke bomb in back of us, in front of us, so that we were pretty well hidden, when I got to the bottom of the hill, still untouched, I sank down behind a hedgerow. And there is this guy, whom we'll call Andy, beside me, sitting back to the farmhouse.

And I'm looking at the farmhouse through the hedgerow, and a lieutenant from my company is very foolishly running up to a window, and he's getting a burp gun right in the throat, and he turns around and faces us. And blood is spurting out, and Andy is sitting, calmly, in the middle of everything, opening a C-ration can and eating it.

And I just couldn't believe it. This falls into the category of what I don't know.

How many persons were still at Mauthausen? How many survivors were still at Mauthausen by the time you were sent away to your next stop?

I'll have to guess. And I'm going to emphasize again that this is a speculative guess, an educated guess based upon subtracting so many from the Russian prisoner category, so many from those who kept on dying, so many of those who were repatriated in other directions. The Poles had been in, for example, and the Ukrainians had been in, repatriating. I dare say that it must have been down to 4,000 to 6,000 by the time I left.

Is there anything about your experience with the liberation of Mauthausen that we haven't covered that still stands out in your mind that you'd like to discuss before we go on to the next topic?

I'm sure that 10 minutes after you leave this house, I'll think of 60 things, but the answer is no.

After you left and you went to your next post that you've told me about already, how much longer did you stay in Europe before being sent back to the States?

I spent until something like the last week in November in the 79th division in Kitzingen. And suddenly, I was put in a jeep with a driver who was going to Marseille. And in one fell swoop, he drove in rather cold weather, in an open jeep, 60, 70 miles an hour, from Kitzingen down to Marseille. When I stepped out of that jeep, I was absolutely frozen stiff. I couldn't move a thing. Did you ever experience anything like that? So we boarded the ship in Marseille, and I was home by December 15 and discharged within a couple of days.

I'm going to pause now and fix the tape. We're just about done.

During that period-- this is not relevant, but--

Oh, let me change the tape. Just one moment. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with George Leonard, and this is tape three, side B. And you wanted to add a postscript to your comments about being discharged.

I wanted to tell you what Mauthausen did for me besides, I think, making a better person out of me in many respects. As soon as I came home, shortly after December 15, I started applying for colleges. I applied to Northeastern and Boston University in Suffolk. And all three turned me down. with the word that we're so mobbed with applications from new returning vets that we can't fit you in.

I could understand it anyway because my stepfather had died in my senior year of high school, and I sort of fell apart. And I got some grades that I had never been capable of before. Before that, I had been an excellent student.

To make a long story short, that I immediately applied to Harvard, and the guy called me. He says, write an essay. I don't know why that affects me about your experiences. And I did, and I was immediately accepted. So that's what Mauthausen did for me.

Do you, by any chance, still have that essay?

I never had it. I didn't make a copy of it. I did not make a copy of it, and I never got a copy back.

By the way, it was primarily about the administration of Mauthausen. And I went into all sorts of group human relational theories, from the functions of the executive, which I had been reading. And I'm sure you read about that, read about that. And by the way, it was by someone who had had experience in Tulelake with the Japanese, which they didn't feel guilty about back then, but they do, of course, now.

But there were certain administrative policies that had been brought to light about getting along with large groups and functioning with large groups, such as hearing, airing out, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I put all this stuff in there, and Harvard loved it.

When you were discharged, what was your rank, and what medals and honors had you received?

I had been promised a rating by the captain and by others toward the end of the war, particularly after my-- what do you call it-- was going through my Bronze Star medal. And they said that they'd give me an honorary squad with a rating of staff sergeant or higher. The captain said this.

And then I took the jeep, and the first sergeant said that, well, he'd go along with two days, what do you call it, but under no circumstances would he back a sergeancy after that. So I was on my way home, practically anyway, and I just shrugged and said, to heck with it.

My honors were the Combat Infantryman Award, three battle stars, a unit citation-- I think, given by the French or the Belgians, I forget which-- the Bronze Star medal, and the Purple Heart.

When you arrived home, what did you tell your family and your friends about your experiences over in Europe, specifically about the liberation of Mauthausen?

I answered questions, but that's-- and then very limited. I didn't talk much at all. I just had the feeling, and I went around like this for a long, long time, that nobody could possibly understand anything I said. They were so far from it.

When you came home, did you have any flashbacks or nightmares of experiencing that?

No, I had no-- I did not suffer from any problems like that at all. I did suffer from one thing, a jumpiness, which I put in one thing I wrote. I couldn't study.

And I used to go take some books, Harvard books, that I was supposed to be reading or studying, and get on a streetcar in Boston and ride forever around, buying newspapers in one station, discarding it, buying another newspaper in another station, doing like that. And that was one of the best things that happened to me because I met Phyllis at a streetcar stop at Coolidge Corner in Brookline.

And Phyllis is-- you referred to Phyllis several times-- would you please tell me who Phyllis is?

My wife. She's my wife, yeah, coming from a very Jewish family.

You had mentioned very much earlier in the interview about your aspirations when you were a child and how the war changed them a little bit. When you came home from combat, what aspirations-- what did you want to do with your life?

My first one was to be a diplomat. I changed that along the way, and I don't recall what changed me.

I'll tell you about another. I wanted to be a diplomat, and I changed along the way to wanting to be a functionary in a government agency. Let me tell you something after that.

Yeah, let me ask you a few other questions that we can put on the record. Did you follow the Nuremberg trials?

Yeah.

And along those same lines, with respect to following the Nuremberg trials, did you feel that justice was done?

It was done, but not enough, yeah. In other words, I thought that there were probably some fringe people there that should have got more than they got. I don't recall their names right now. But generally speaking, if I had to say was I satisfied or not, I'd have to say I was satisfied.

Did you follow the Eichmann trial, and did you think that was just?

I know I followed it. Yeah, yes, I thought it was just.

What have you told your family about the things that you've told me today? How much of this does your family know,

your friends, or how much of this do you talk about?

This family or my family back from my childhood?

Both.

My family back-- my brothers and sisters and my mother, et cetera, there was no use. They had made a polite attempt at listening, that sort of thing, and blah, blah, blah. Phyllis, of course, has been a very, very great supporter.

And my kids got caught up in-- from a childish point of view, seeing the box of a Nazi dagger and all of the stuff, the artifacts I brought back, and that sort of thing. And they were caught up. And when I sold my first novel, I got a \$2,000 advance, which was a big deal back in 1963 or '65.

And we took the \$2,000 and put it in a trip with round-trip trip airfare to Amsterdam and a fully-equipped microbus with camping equipment and everything for five people with a tent that zipped on the side and all the stuff. And we took that for three weeks and went around Europe. And I found myself following the route of the 11th.

The kids were excited at it, particularly Jeff, my oldest son, particularly. He was, like, 14 at the time, I guess. And we went to Bastogne. And everyone laughed at seeing the Nuts hot dog stand, "Nuts" being what McAuliffe had said to the Germans. When asked to surrender, he said "nuts," a thing like that.

Do you speak publicly about your experiences, and have you ever been interviewed before?

No.

And why have you decided to do an interview right now?

I didn't decide. It crept up. It crept up. I didn't, any one day, say, hey, I'm going to do an interview. All of a sudden, Dan said to me that he had turned my name into the Holocaust Museum as being someone who had been there and helped liberate a concentration camp.

Who's Dan?

Lednicer, Dan Lednicer. He's a very fantastically intelligent man, a Jew, fervently Jewish, but not religiously so. And I know you know what I mean by that, culturally, et cetera. And he just shows brilliance.

He was a chemist-- is a chemist. And he has turned out three or four tomes that thick-- and they publish them as fast as they get them from him-- on chemistry, chemical solvents and compounds, and so on and so forth.

I just can't conceive of anyone doing what he does and remembers it all up here. Dan is a brilliant guy, and he was over here a few weeks ago having dinner with us, him and a girl. We didn't talk about this at all, but I did tell him that you guys had called and were going to interview.

When I was called about the interview, which I didn't expect or know about, particularly-- I just knew that I was giving testimony of some sort to the what do you call it-- I shrugged and I thought, well, it's a good chance for me to see what I know and don't know and remember or don't remember. And it's a good chance to see if I can get through this because I haven't been able to in the past. Have you had interviews with others?

Liberators? What would you say is the lasting impact that your experiences had on your life? The most lasting impact?

The most lasting impact has to do with understanding what man is capable of. And that amazes the heck out of me, and I don't know how to process that. I don't know what else to say.

How do you react when you hear Holocaust deniers? How do you react when you hear Holocaust deniers?

It does upset me, of course. I don't know what to do about it. I don't think that anyone can do much about it. If you fight it, you're wrong. If you don't fight it, you're wrong.

There will be-- again, we're talking about the extent to which people can be incredibly stupid or bestial or whatnot, and this is another example.

There is one bit of unfinished business I wanted to make sure I tied up before we conclude. You said that you had a seven-week recovery period after you were injured. Can you put that in a time frame? When were you--

I was wounded February 7. I came back to the company toward the end of March. And I want to put it on the record that-- I don't know why, but during that time, the company went through one of the most horrible experiences that they had gone through to date, and that was crossing the Kahl River. I have a picture of the makeshift bridge over the Kahl River upstairs.

And the reason this was so bad was that they were exposed, crossing it, wading it with rifle held up and taking fire with no cease at all. And that's when my first sergeant that I liked got the bullet through the hand. And my being off the line during that period was, I hate to say this, but a godsend.

Would you be willing to share with me the names of the novels that you've written?

The first one I named Horn of Plenty, but Warner Books changed it to Sexmax because it was a business of helping everyone through government. The government filled in what any person was lacking in this novel.

The other another one was Alien, which I had named originally The Flying Saucer Murders, which I and my wife liked better. But Playboy Press decided to make it Alien to build on the reputation that the other Alien had had.

Then I wrote a book called Somebody Else Is On the Moon, which gave me the greatest monetary return and name and everything else. It was published in five different languages and made a French book club, and I was a Japanese fan club and everything else. And I'm still living through the reverberations of that.

I decided, after that book, to go into meditation and find out what life was really all about. And that's where I am now.

Is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you would like to add before we conclude the interview today? Is there anything that we haven't covered? I realize, after I leave, you'll come up with 10 things. But is there anything that comes to your mind right now that we haven't covered that you'd like to include?

Yeah. I'm going to be personal and speculative, and I'm talking about-- the Holocaust was, in the final analysis, a Jewish story. You don't deny that, do you, first and foremost?

And I'm thinking that, from a genetic and a practical point of view, comma-- because I am aware of the magnificence of the Jewish stock, comma-- I'm thinking of the need which should have started earlier of breaking out the Jewish gene pool and having that good blood spread around.

I'm serious about this. Phyllis knows how I feel. Yeah, I believe that.

I would like to thank you for doing the interview with me today, and I know it was difficult for you, and I personally, and as a part of the museum. We appreciate it. Thank you very much.

My daughter got married, and I know you were in the wedding.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with George Leonard.