

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Alan Lukens. This is track number two and you were talking about how you've kept up with many of the people.

Yeah, and not only the Belgian I was just talking about. They're a great friend, but two others that I particularly met, and one I've been in very close touch with them ever since. A Frenchman named Joaquin Coté was among a group of French resistance youth in a mountain town about half an hour away from Geneva, an alpine village called Habère-Poche.

At Christmas of 1943, there was a small castle there and 35 of these young people, mostly men but some girls, decided they could have a Christmas party. The Germans were too far away, and that they would be safe on Christmas Day in this small castle. So they had a party. Unfortunately, one of-- there was a Vichyite there who heard about this and informed the Germans.

They came up all drunk in the middle of the party. They killed all but five people, burned the Chateau. Five people played dead, but they were arrested the next day. One of them was Joaquin Coté. They were sent from camp to camp, a horrible situation all the way through.

Four of them died along the way. Only Joaquin Coté made it. I met him in 1995 and because of that became great friends. I went back in 2000 and 2005, and in 2009 I guess it was. Susie and I went over to their village and he had died, but the son has been a very close friend ever since. They stayed with us in Washington, and we went over there, went to several services, made speeches and [INAUDIBLE] and so on. We're going to see him this year. He and his wife are close friends.

That was one story. He kept saying, well, I was the one that saved his father. Well, I didn't, because he obviously was one of the many survivors. Through him there were two or three other veterans from that village that I've seen, they've given me their stories and so on.

Another curious story from another friend, he was on a train in Germany being hauled as prisoners on their way to Dachau. The train got stuck in a little valley between two tunnels. They were all French on board. They were afraid that they would be attacked by allied planes who were--

Bombing?

Who were bombing German troop trains. And they tore up their clothes and put on top of the freight car a red, white, and blue tricolor to help the allies spot them. And then finally, one of these guys that I met, he and a Polish friend walked back along the tracks about two miles through the Germans to where the Americans were. They got a bulldozer to go down the tracks, open it up, and pull this one car back to the American camps where they were all, of course, welcomed, and eventually brought back to life.

Do you remember his name?

Yeah, that was [? Fun ?] Fred was his name, and I went to see him in Grenoble. I think I have more names in some of these. If I give you one of these you'll have some of it.

Yeah.

So that was another interesting story. But there were-- everybody had an interesting story. One of the wonderful people when we went back this year in 2010, whom I hadn't met before, but had an English wife and he spoke English, because I had my son and my grandson along which helped. A wonderful man, and he was down to 70 pounds or something. Now he lives in southern France.

But his story was really unbelievable. That every day the Germans, the Nazi guards, would count the number of bodies or the number of people standing, and thereby decide how much food would be rationed. And so so many were dying

each night that they would carry the bodies out, stand them up, so that there would be a larger ration.

He's told us that story was really extraordinary. I keep up with him. He lives in southern France, a wonderful man.

You had said in one of your articles when you went back to Dachau that you delivered a message from President Barack Obama?

Yeah.

Can you talk about that, please?

Oh, sure. That was difficult to get, because he had done one for the other camp. But I went through my good friend Chris Van Hollen, our Congressman.

Congressman.

And he said he would help. He did. I wrote a letter to the president, backed up by Chris Van Hollen. He kept helping, went to the annual baseball party at the George Will's that year, and then Biden was there. I asked him to help. I don't know if he ever did.

But I kept pushing and we didn't get any answer. So I finally got through to some White House guy and said oh yeah, he'll do it. And I had suggested what he might say, even. Well, finally, at the very last minute a fax came to the hotel in Dachau where I was staying that morning.

I had already worked up my speech by sort of semi quoting him, but this time I was able to do it. So I can actually-- but that was sort of a last minute exercise. Here is my speech. And see I-- here, this is actually, I had written the speech, and then I was going to sluff over that, or say [INAUDIBLE], but then finally this is the message that came in time. So I was able to--

From the president?

Yeah-- work that in. I think he used practically the same speech that he did for Buchenwald. But it was Chris Van Hollen in this because they kept driving to do something. I had been to a little-- I knew Chris fairly well, and I'd been to an event here in Chevy Chase at one point. This is sort of funny. There's a wonderful Romanian.

Do you think the world has learned any lessons from the Holocaust?

Well, I hope so, and I think the museum deserves a lot of credit for keeping it up. I was a wonderful event this year, and before also.

The 20th anniversary event?

The 20th anniversary with the-- I suppose they said they were 120 veterans there. I really didn't see very many, but I guess they were. And then of course of all the survivors. We had a very fascinating dinner that night, and they put us with one of the big supporting families of the museum.

Did you talk to any survivors from Dachau?

That night?

Yeah.

No, there wasn't anybody that had been anywhere near-- well, some had visited, a lot of people had visited Dachau, of course. No, I didn't. There wasn't anybody else around that had been to Dachau as a soldier or as a survivor. I mean,

plenty of them had visited lately, of course. Yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

No, there were-- that was a very nice occasion. It was interesting the next morning to hear Jimmy Carter-- Jimmy-- Bill Clinton?

Bill Clinton, it was wonderful.

Yeah. Is there any part of the museum that you relate to--

Well, you know I--

Liberation or--

Well, one of the things, we had the three years in Denmark. And I got very involved there with Danes. They have a wonderful museum.

And one of these, I think it was '90-- it was 2000, I guess when we were there, we ended up with a whole lot of Danish veterans, survivors. And actually, were invited for a very special thing the night before the big event out in a little section of Dachau, where they lit candles. And we were invited, because we just happened to meet the Danes and because we'd been in Denmark.

So I kept up, and then in the Holocaust Museum they had that wonderful boat--

The boat, yeah.

--given there, so I was-- the other day when I was in there I wanted to see it alone, just to see it. And so I ended up going out backwards, so I went all the way through that way. There's a lot more to see, and I need to get over there more often. I should.

I was just wondering if you related to the liberation section, when the camps were liberated?

Yeah, oh yeah, very much so.

Whether that strikes a chord? Yeah.

And especially Dachau-- oh, yeah, absolutely. No, I specifically went to that. And I should go there more often, it just is always seems difficult to get down and park, which [INAUDIBLE] is not.

Did your experience during the war affect how you raised your children?

I don't know, that's a hard one to answer. I mean, I think that we-- they were all part of our Foreign Service. And I don't think that they knew much, but it was all very separate from the war until more recently. Now, I took my son last year. Susie couldn't go, but I took my son Tim and my grandson Chase over for the special thing in 2010. And each of them wrote about that. For example, there's an article by my son Tim. And than--

What was your grandson's reaction?

He was very impressed. He was at that point at Brook School, and now he's at University of Vermont. He wrote quite an article about it. I think he was very moved by it.

It was wonderful to have them both there, and then talk to my friend [? CotÃ© ?] who came back for this. And for this

other fellow who had [PHONE RINGING] I'm trying to think, remember his name right now. It's in one of the articles here. Who's now living in Provence, who spoke English, so that was good for me. I got it right here somewhere.

Did the experience, again, that you went through affect your feelings? Of course, you were very young, you were only in the early 20s obviously?

Yeah.

Affect you religiously, spiritually? Did it make you more religious? Again, you were quite young at the time, I know.

It's hard to say. I was brought up as a Protestant Episcopal, and always went to the services that they had--

But I'm saying--

--with the chaplains.

--seeing the evil that you saw, the boxcars and the crematoriums, did that have any influence on you?

I don't know, not directly I don't think. I have continued to be a supporter of the church where I was, wherever I was and so on. But it-- I wouldn't say there was a direct connection except that--

Connection. What are your thoughts about Germany?

Well, it took me a long time to get very enthusiastic about Germans. Maybe it was a little bit my father. Both wars he felt the same way, pretty much. But and I learned a little bit of German here and there.

But one interesting thing that I haven't mentioned, but I will quickly, that first one in '95 I sat next to a German general at a big dinner the night before. He was the head of the medical department, and that was quite a dinner that I did get into, or some of us did.

Anyway, he asked if I would talk to his medical students, men and women, about what happened. I said yes of course I would. So by that time the next day or something we went to Salzburg for a little thing. I took a train back.

And a day or two later a German Colonel met me at the hotel, which still struck me as odd. Took me out, we had lunch at the German headquarters with about 25 officers, and they brought up-- that was kind of bizarre-- they found a kid of my then age, 21, a private in the German army. And kind of made him sit there to see what it was like. That was a little bizarre.

But they were all very nice. And some had been also in NATO command. We had given a big award to this German general, head of the medical thing. So after lunch he invited me to go into this auditorium where there were about 100 medical students, boys and girls in their 20s, I guess. And he said did they almost all spoke English.

Well, I don't know, I spoke in English obviously, and fairly slowly, and I told them all about my experience. And I got a standing ovation at the end. I don't know how much they got out of it, but it was fascinating to do that.

On the way back from this last time at Lufthansa I sat next to a German general of all things, and he was very nice. After all, as you say to get used to the fact that they are allies, and I made a point in my speech everywhere, before and there, particularly that we were all-- this would never happen again. And that-- where-- these are somewhere. Anyhow, that we're all allies, and that we would all together believe in the slogan of never again.

And I complimented him on the fact that all of these events they brought in all kinds of German high school and college kids. And I'd say most of the crowd there in 2010 were German. Well, maybe half German and half survivors. It was hard to tell. There were a couple of thousand people there.

But now they have a wonderful German ladies that run the Welcome Center, and they were the ones that I had dealt with beforehand and got on the program. And they were very worried-- it was funny, ahead of time that the initial rivalry between the three divisions would make it odd if I represented All-American troops, unless I got clearance from the other divisions. Well, I did. I knew the guys in each one.

I called up and said look, I'm going to be back there, and I'm not just speaking for the 20th, I happen to be with all of us who were there in '45. Do you mind? Oh, no, no, that's fine, you represent us. I tracked them down, one from each division somewhere in this country.

But it's funny that the German organizers were afraid that somehow that this would come up, that if I spoke-- anyway, we cleared all that. So I think enough time has gone by so that anybody that was there at all and still living, because an awful lot have died.

Yeah.

But I sort of got into this because at the end I became president of the retirees of the 20th Armored Division. I did that for about five years. I organized several of our reunions.

And the biggest one was at West Point just before this. It was actually the same year, 2010. And they had one more we didn't get to, and now they're going to-- they wanted to go back and have a final one at Camp Campbell, Kentucky. I'm not sure I want to go back there, particularly.

When you have these reunions do you talk about Dachau?

Yeah, and I gave a special talk that year about going back to Dachau, and what had happened. And there was a funny reaction to that. The people who hadn't seen Dachau didn't seem to care about it. I mean, it was weird, because that was only a very--

You mean the people hadn't been there initially?

In our division, there were really very few who had. And the others had lots of other war stories and about taking Munich and all that, but they didn't--

They were not physically in Dachau?

They had never seen it, and weren't particularly shocked by it until they had-- so I didn't make a big point. But I told them what had happened. And that was kind of curious feeling.

And I didn't like to criticize the other people. Maybe it's contrast, that I had such a fascinating career afterwards. To some of them this was the not the Dachau, but the fact of being in the 20th and in the war was probably the-- I don't mean to sound disparaging, but the biggest thing in their lives.

Their high point?

They went back to their small places and where they lived, and brought up, and that was fine. Now, that wasn't true of all of them. There was one guy in Tucson when we had our thing there that he had done a lot of speaking, and he just died. He was a very good man.

And when we went and had our reunion there he rallied around and found all of these survivors and a number of Holocaust Jewish refugees and people. So that was very interesting. So it didn't apply to everybody, but I would say to some that it was the-- that Dachau was not, except for those of us who saw it, was not the main.

When you meet survivors do you automatically tell them that you were in the army and you were--

Well, yeah, I'm not pushing it at them, but if they ask and so on, yeah.

You don't volunteer it in other words?

Well, I do, I do. I mean, if I find that there are survivors from the war, yes, I do right away. Yeah.

You do?

And they're always interested, I must say. Even if they come from another camp.

Yeah.

Buchenwald or something.

Do you read a lot about that time and those places?

Not as much as I should. I'm just getting Atkinson's new book on the war. I don't know, we don't do as much reading as we should.

Or did you, did you read, I should say?

Yeah, well off and on I have, sure.

Yeah.

I don't know, I think that the-- we don't read as much as we should. Too many newspapers and articles.

When you-- I mean, you've been on the inside, but when there are articles and programs on other genocides in the world?

Well, I've watched the-- because I've had too much time in Africa. I watched that very much--

And especially in Africa?

Yeah, the Congolese thing is just a continual horrible mess down there. Rwanda is the same thing.

Right, so again because you were visual?

But that's more of my African connection than the Dachau one, accept that one genocide is just as bad as another.

I was going to say-- yeah.

Yeah.

Do you feel you have a deeper understanding because you saw it up close when you were 21 years old?

Yeah, I think so. Although, it's funny because it was so far back and then I had all my Foreign Service career and this and that. And it was really toward the end of that when I've had time to go to these reunions and work on them and go back to Dachau that brought it back much more than the intervening years when we were traveling in Africa. The kids were so young and all that.

Right, right.

Well, thank you. I've enjoyed this. I guess that covers things pretty well.

Well, I going to said, unless is there anything else you want to add before we?

Well, I just want to thank you. I think it's wonderful that you're doing this, you and other volunteers. And I did tell the different people at the museum at one point that I'm open to make speeches. Nobody's asked me at this point, but if anybody wants to I'm still available to.

Wonderful.

You asked one funny question about the Germans. Well, it's interesting because the German embassy here I came back at one point, they had one of their young attachÃ©s that was supposed to sort of take care of this kind of a thing and follow up on. It was a little odd, but I went over and spoke there once at the German embassy to the young officers about what had happened. That was a couple of years ago.

What was their reaction? Do you remember some of the questions they asked?

Well, the were interested, they asked questions. I was a little bit cynical or skeptical. I think that they were trying to be on the right side of everything by bringing it up. And I was happy to do it, but I felt a little kind of a unusual event. Well, thank you very much. Gail.

Well, thank you, thank you.

OK.

This concludes United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Alan Lukens.