

Oral history interview with Strom Thurmond

1:01- Asked to describe what he expected to find versus what he did find in the concentration camps.

He was in the 1st Army which uncovered the Buchenwald concentration camp near Leipzig. What he saw in Buchenwald was unlike anything he had ever witnessed before. Luxembourg had been there and many other famous generals. He was amazed about what he heard about the camps. He heard a story about the camp commandant's wife. She had liked tattoos and whenever someone died in the camp with a tattoo that she liked she would make lamp shades and other items out of the skin.

2:04- He was told that most people died from starvation. People were stacked up by the hundreds in the camp. Some people were still alive. Several hundred people died of starvation. Doctors were also unable to identify who was alive and who was dead. The doctors were able to save some from dying of starvation.

2:40- He gained knowledge on how the prisoners were being killed. They were essentially being killed in three main ways. The first being starvation. He was told that the prisoners were only allotted one cup of thin pea soup per day. He believes that starvation was the main way that prisoners were killed. The second way that inmates were being killed was death during attempted escape. The guards would shoot the prisoners while they were trying to escape over a fence. The last way prisoners died was via a large mallet. There was a box, the size Thurmond reckoned to be about the size of a telephone booth, where prisoners would walk in and an SS guard would kill him or her with the mallet.

4:09- There was a very little difference between the living and the dead when he entered the camp.

5:00- Thurmond believes that it is impossible to imagine what was happening in the camps. People can't imagine how cruel the guards were.

5:13- Asked when he had heard of what was going on in the camps. Was he still in the United States?

He had first heard of what was going on in the concentration camps when he was in Europe. He landed on D-Day in Normandy and then he went to Paris. From Paris he went to Belgium and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He crossed the Rhine River and entered Germany. They approached Berlin and sat on the banks of the river while Russia took over. From Berlin he entered Buchenwald.

8:42- Asked whether anyone had been in Buchenwald before his division.

His division, the first Army, entered Buchenwald immediately after it was liberated.

9:13- He was shocked with the inhumanity of the concentration camp. He believes that it must have been the orders of Hitler that he passed down to conduct the camps as such. Anyone who disagreed with him would be killed.

10:00- Asked whether he had the opportunity to go to any other camps.

He only went to Buchenwald however, he heard of what was going on in the other camps. He heard that the prisoners were being gassed in other camps.

10:48- Asked whether he spoke or came into contact with any survivors while in Buchenwald.

He did not talk to survivors because they were so weak that they couldn't talk. Everyone had a hard time knowing who was living and who was dead; the doctors could not determine the living from the dead either.

11:17- Asked whether his division stayed long in Buchenwald.

They remained in Buchenwald only long enough to survey the situation. Other divisions came to Buchenwald to take away the bodies.

11:56- Asked what the barracks were like inside. Were there barracks by the time his division arrived at Buchenwald?

The barracks were horrible; they were merely places to live. There were no beds in the barracks.

12:24- Asked about the reaction of the people in his company.

He and the people in his troop wanted to know how the people of Leipzig did not know what was going on. If they did know, why didn't they do anything? He knows that some were too scared and others were trying to survive themselves and were indifferent to the situation. The prisoners were put through such agony- how could the Germans do that?

13:43- Asked how the Germans were disposing of the bodies.

He didn't see how the Germans disposed of the bodies; however, he heard the bodies were buried.

14:00- Asked whether he heard of the camps before he arrived at Buchenwald.

He had heard about the camps during the war but his division was not in the area. He heard about the gassings as well.

14:42- Asked whether he heard about the camps while he was still in South Carolina.

He was a circuit court judge in South Carolina however he had not heard about what was happening in the camps until he was in Europe.

15:46- Asked whether there was anything else he wanted to share.

He would never forget what he had seen in Buchenwald; how human beings were treated like they were in the camp.

16:26- Asked whether he had any idea how many people were there once he arrived at Buchenwald.

He did not know how many people were left in the camp because many were disposed of before they arrived but there were probably hundreds of bodies in a large pile in the camp.