

--Susan Singer. I'm at the International Liberators Conference in Washington DC here to talk to Mr. Freedman about his experiences in liberating Buchenwald concentration camp. Hello, Mr Freedman.

How do you do?

Before we really get started, I need some information for the record. OK? Could I have your full name, please?

Leon J. Freedman.

And where do you live now?

I live in Southwest Harbor, Maine.

And what was your date of birth?

March 5, 1913.

How old were you at the time of the liberation?

32.

And you had a professor before the war?

Yes.

And what was that?

I was interested in art, books, documents, and music-- music.

And what is your present occupation?

I own and operate an antique and art gallery. And what was your military unit during the war?

76th Division, 304th Infantry, Company C.

And your rank--

Second Platoon.

Oh, I'm sorry. And your rank?

Just a plain private. And you were involved in the liberation of Buchenwald, is that correct?

Yes, I was.

OK. How did you first hear about the camps or Buchenwald? And could you give a--

I'd been stationed on a road block on the perimeter of a small village. It's Saxony Thuringia. And we noticed small groups, the first one small group of people approaching us in the road ahead of us wearing striped clothes, raggedy, shuffling along. No women. Men hobbling. Three or four young boys, 14, 16, 17 years of age.

And from a distance we couldn't make out what type of people they were, because it was our first experience in seeing something of that nature. We've seen other stragglers, so-called farm workers and things of that nature. But it was the

first time we had ever encountered the sight of that type. And as they approached, we had to be very cautious under strict military orders to be aware of all sorts of people disguised as innocent people but who had turned out to be hardline SS troops, who infiltrated our lines.

And so we waited a bit till they came closer we could see that these people were absolutely not military in any way, shape or manner. And upon questioning them, we found out that they had run away from a camp. And I was able to speak some Yiddish with some of them. And they described they were in a labor camp. I couldn't understand what it could have been.

However, after a little bit, myself and a colleague understood what they were trying to tell us. Never seen the pitiful condition of them physically, and two or three mentally didn't seem to be acting normal and under great mental stress. And one or two were actually in a wandering state of mind, helped along by other colleagues.

We immediately made arrangements in the village. The first house that we approached, we ordered the people out of the house. And at the same time we provided another cottage another little house with a few, dividing them, and forced, literally forced out of anger to have these residents of the homes provide hot water, whatever food they could scramble together, augmented by what we immediately gave them of our rations, and a hurried call to the mess sergeant to get some food up and make these people comfortable as much as we possibly could. By that time, we began to get other groups coming towards us. And it became clear to us that something dreadful had happened.

The following day, being a member of a little group of three of us had done a little entertaining amongst the troops, I played the violin a bit. And I had an Italian colleague, two Italian colleagues, one play the guitar, one played the accordion. And we performed a little entertainment, some kind of an entertainment for the troops, starting way back in Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. We all traveled over, embarked in Plymouth, left Plymouth, port of embarkation, and entertained the troops going across 11 long days and 11 nights till we came to England. And we entertain whenever we could.

And so the special service officer asked us to come along with him the following day, see if could entertain some of these people in the so-called slave labor camp. Well, as we approached this huge complex of buildings with barbed wire fences, we began to notice a very distinct foul odor. Well, during our combat days, we had occasion to experience all sorts of filth, dirt, odors, scenes, sights, but we all reacted immediately to this very foreign horrible odor.

And shortly before coming to the gates of this complex, we had noticed some railroad cars on a siding. And one was partially opened up. And we could see bits of clothing, colors. And we ran the Jeep over close to the siding, and we noticed that it was composed of all children's clothing, shoes, sweaters, hats, mittens, coats, clothing of all description, only of children. We couldn't seem to understand it.

You saw no children anywhere.

We saw no children. One or two of the fellows got really-- began to have some-- we had another Jeep with us, accompanying us. There were two Jeeps, special service group, lieutenant, couple soldiers. We all had mounted 50 caliber machine guns on the Jeeps. One of them says, if I think this is what I think it is I'm pretty damn mad. And he let off a volley of 50 caliber machine guns on a tank car. And we began to see liquid coming out of it. It turned out to be gasoline.

However, we went into the camp. And we saw evidences of ragged clothing on wires and a few remnants of bodies, partially clothed in striped clothes, such as we seen our first instance of those stragglers coming up the road. And we didn't make any tour of the camp, but we were directed into a building. And upon entering this building, we found it occupied by women, young women--

Who is giving you this tour?

This was not a tour. We were directed to--

A building. Who was there to--

We had a special service officer in charge of entertainment. And he was called upon to provide some entertainment for these few people that were in this building, which turned out to be all women, mostly Hungarian women, and young girls, from the age of probably 16, 17 years, to women, possibly in their 30s. And it seems that they were left there or kept there to await transportation back to the Allied lines.

How many days had elapsed from the actual first liberation to--

About four days, four to five days.

Do you know if any medical people had been through?

Apparently, there had been some medical people through. However, we saw several instances of women, particularly some young women, that were so weak they could hardly even walk. They had swollen limbs. Their feet particularly were swollen. Awfully emaciated. Somewhat cleaned up because the first thing that they required was cleanliness.

And another thing we noticed predominantly was that their hair was cut short, close cropped. Some had tried to hide it by putting bandannas on. But the small, short fringes of hair protruded around their front of the head. And we were greeted very enthusiastically. And at the same time, we had some candy bars, as much as we could get hold of to distribute amongst them. And there were several, I say, that they couldn't actually move too much, sitting. Some were lying down, very pitiful.

However, we tried to play a few tunes for them, American. We tried to play some Hungarian tunes or some tune that had some Slavic notes to it. And they responded very enthusiastically. And, as a matter of fact, there was a piano in the room. And one small blonde person, whose hair was cut very short, almost like a, well, crew cut practically, sat down at the piano and performed marvelously. We found out later she was a concert pianist out of Hungary. And on the battered piano, she produced some beautiful classical music. Needless to say we were very much affected.

You spoke to them, did you not? Take a minute. It's OK.

We cried with them. As I cried out, we stayed a while, a couple hours, came back to our unit. The following day, we went back again. We were told that three of the younger women had died shortly after we had left. And one I remember particularly was a beautiful girl with reddish hair. Looked at us. She was one lying down. And she just raised the hand weakly, smiled. That was the last time I ever saw. She was dead. She passed away shortly after we left, we were told.

We didn't go back there again, because our unit was transferred towards another section of line. And as far as I can recall, that's the last I saw of any of the so-called prisoners, those so-called people of that camp.

Did you stay around the area? Or you said--

We stayed in that general area--

For a while.

Yes.

So you must have come across some German civilians at the time?

Yes. I had one particular queer experience I think deserves to be related. We moved to Altenburg, Germany, which is the ancient seat of the Dukes of Saxony, as I found out afterwards. And we were-- my little unit, so-called entertainment unit, was housed in a private home. And three or four days after leaving the Buchenwald area, one of my colleagues came in one day and threw a little figurine on the desk I recognized it immediately as an antique Etruscan figurine.

On closer examination, it proved to be just what I thought it was. I asked him where he got it. He said there's a castle about half a mile on the outskirts of Altenburg, Germany. And I immediately made up my mind that I had to get over there and see what kind of a place this was. He said it was a beautiful place. And he walked into the courtyard and nobody was around, one or two chickens flying around, walked up this ancient well-worn stairs into a huge hall. And on either side were these glass cases beautifully displayed with artifacts of all sorts.

He had no conception of what he had. But he had told me he had just reached and slid one of the doors open and taken out this figurine. Nobody approached him, saw no signs of life. He came back to the barracks. And that's how I happened to be there.

Well, I went back the next morning. I got a Jeep. And I found the castle. He described to me how we got up to that room. And I followed his directions and found myself in that same room. And it certainly was loaded with some beautiful antique artifacts of all kinds and many examples of this ancient art.

And as I was looking at them, farther end of that long corridor, one of those high doors, probably 15, 18 feet high, opened up and a gentleman appeared there, wearing a gray English walking suit, as I describe it. A man in the 60s announced himself. He seemed very cordial. After described these things to me and after a short few minutes, he invited me in to see some more where upon we went through the door he had come in a huge-- well, it's a huge living room with all sorts of trophies of heads of animals, deer, elk, chamois, and cases full of beautiful porcelains, paintings, oriental rugs on the floor, huge, huge fireplace. I would say a room approximately 70 to 80 feet long, as I would say, I would compare it to the size of the room that I happened to see in the White House this morning. I forget which room it is, but it's a huge ballroom sort of thing.

And he took me further on and through another door at the end of that room and into a room where he said I'd see some magnificent porcelain. Well, it turned out to be that it was the most magnificent collection of porcelains I ever saw my life, including two sets of the famous monkey-faced musicians made by a famous porcelain maker, by the name of Kandler, as we know it in art history. There were two sets of those.

So it happened that in that section of Saxony Thuringia is the area where this famous porcelain deposits were found, known as kaolin, which the ancient Chinese had discovered many years ago, and they discovered that in the early 17th century there in Meissen, known as Meissen ware. And we're all familiar with this sign of the Meissen works. It's the crossed swords.

But the point I want to bring out, and I'm coming to now, on our way out, we had passed through this narrow corridor to this porcelain room. He said, I'd like you to meet my mother. And as he said that, he opened up these large, tall doors into a banquet hall, so-called, what we call in our antique language, an black Italian antique banquet table, which it could possibly seat 75 to 100 people easily. And at the farther end was an elderly lady dressed in black. I guess she were little white lace cap, having a little something to eat. I couldn't exactly see what it was.

He introduced me, American soldier came to visit. And she greeted me. She asked me to come close to her. He accompanied me over to meet her. And she said in broken English, she said and pointed a finger at me or raised her hand and shook her forefinger and said, Hitler was a great man. He will live in history. He is the Savior of the German people.

That struck me as-- I was left speechless. I didn't know what to say. I only remember one thing. My remark to her was, it is so sad that you are so mistaken. I hope your grandchildren, future generations, will realize what a terrible crime you committed against humanity. She says, I think you might be mistaken. I said, I prefer to leave it as it is. There is no argument, with you especially.

Through all this, her son was quiet, showed no sign of emotion, and walked me back to the room. I said goodbye to her. He asked me on the way out if I would like some sort of a souvenir. I told them my interest in antiques and art objects. And I said not particularly. He said, well, I'd like to give you something. I enjoyed your visit here. It was very civilized. He said, we had a 300th anniversary of the discovery of kaolin here in Saxony Thuringia wherein we made up some little porcelain plaques in a case. And I'd like for you to have this.

And he presented me with a little case, about 5, 6 inches in square, silk lined and had four plaques. And it showed the twin towers of the Dukes of Saxony, which is in Altenburg, Germany, , and also the cross sword designs. And he said, I like very much for you to have something in porcelain that was made in this district. And he gathered up a half a dozen so-called demitasse cups and saucers, beautiful, beautiful in design and color and composition, and insisted that I take that.

I was to go back there the following day. And he was going to let me have to the take back to the United States government a set of those monkey-faced porcelain musicians, which I knew was very rare. And he agreed with me, they were very rare. And I said, well, when I come back, I'd like to give you something in return for that. He said if you would bring me perhaps some coffee, cheese, cigarettes. I said, I'll see what I can do.

Well, I went back and made preparations to be back the following morning if I wasn't deterred by other duties. And I did acquire some things, extra little pieces of food from the mess sergeant, things we gathered up in our quarters. And that night or in the morning, following morning, at 4 o'clock in the morning, we had our orders that we had to be out of there in two hours, by 6 o'clock in the morning. And there was no way to go anywhere else but to prepare and get on trucks to be transported to another location.

And I was the last-- at 6 o'clock in the morning, I, was the last soldier on what we call a 6-5 truck. And I had the driver take a picture of me leaving Altenburg, Germany, which I still have somewhere in my possession, and never did get back there again. The Russians came in. As we were leaving, the Russians entered Altenburg, Germany. They took over that sector. Other than that, I'll tell you a few other things, but they didn't have anything to do with liberation or with in a camp that had been liberated.

Let me ask you this before we end, which we have to do, do you feel that this-- let's put it this way, what do you think the best way to teach people about this era is? Or should it be taught? Or how do we handle--

Whatever medium is necessary, in any way, shape or manner, to bring what had happened in the Holocaust to the eyes and the minds, to every person in the world, because human beings basically are the same. And they have to be made aware of the weaknesses and morality of their attitude towards man. And as one of the great speakers said, we're all brothers and we're are brothers' keepers.

So any medium, so any country with any people, the morality of treating your fellow man as you would like to be treated morally, mentally, should be instilled in every person's mind. Teaching youngster, making them aware of what happened and what could happen, if we're not safeguarding humanity from doing the awful things that happened.

Thank you very much. And thank you for sharing.

Thank you very much.

I had to cut you off. I start the next--