

Just tell us when. And you know what, if you could let me know when there's 10 minutes more, and then five and then two.

Two what?

Minutes left. This is Bonnie Gurovich interviewing William Johnson of the 90th Infantry Division, October 7, 1981, at the US Holocaust Memorial Council International Conference of Liberators. Mr. Johnson, after you landed in Europe at Le Havre, can you describe the direction which your division took? Give us an itinerary of where you went until you got to the concentration camp.

Oh, boy. Let's see. We boarded forty-and-eights and went into Metz. And then they trucked us into somewhere near the Siegfried Line. And at a place called Hirschfeld, that's where I first started to fight. Hirschfeld, and then on through Mainz, Frankfurt am Main, Hanau, up through Fulda and a place called Ilmenau where Company E ran into some chlorine gas.

And I understand, or I found out years later, that was not too far from Buchenwald, although I didn't know it at the time. And then from there, we went to Hof and Plauen, and then down along the Czechoslovakian border, the little towns and so forth-- I don't remember-- until we hit Flossenbürg. And then across the border from Flossenbürg-- well, on down the border, and then across later on to a place close to [? Klatovy ?], Czechoslovakia where I was on V-E Day. That's where we ended up.

And did you encounter any victims of the Nazis along the way before you got to the concentration camp?

Yeah. I liberated, on a personal basis, a Yugoslavian. I can't tell you anything much about him other than the fact that he was a farm slave laborer, and when he saw me, he realized that he was liberated. We couldn't talk. There was a language barrier that was insurmountable, but he did make it clear that he felt that I had done my part. Now he wanted to do his.

He wanted my rifle and for me to go home, and he continued in my place. Of course, I couldn't do that. And so I took him to the CO to see if we could get him to go with us, but of course, the language barrier killed it, and that was the end of that one.

Where did this happen?

I can't tell you where. All I can tell you it was after we were deep in Germany, had crossed the Main River. It was somewhere near Fulda or in that area somewhere. I don't know exactly.

Mm-hmm. Was it in the town, in the country?

It was in, let's say a small collection of houses, farmhouses where it formed a small nucleus of a town, and then the farms were out either side.

And what was this man doing when you came upon him?

He was in the barn, and we stumbled in the barn to check to make sure that there was no Germans in there. We got two out of it only because he told us they were in there and where they were.

How old a man was he?

He was in his late 20s, early 30s, somewhere in that category.

How was he dressed?

He wasn't dressed too badly. He was not dressed in prison garb or anything like that.

And how did he respond to seeing Americans?

Oh, he was like my bodyguard. He wouldn't let anybody go near me. He stood guard over me all night with my rifle, wouldn't let anybody wake me up for guard duty or anything else.

Was that because you were the first one into the barn?

I was the first one that he saw, yes.

Were you able to talk with him at all?

Only through sign language.

And what were you communicating? What was he communicating?

He was so happy. He couldn't do enough for us. He got hot water. We took over the farmhouse completely, and when I say "we," I'm talking about the whole company and squad and so forth. This squad took over this particular farmhouse, and he got hot water for us.

And of course, that was important because a hot cup of coffee was hard to come by. We all got shaves. This gentleman shaved everybody who wanted to shave. It's hard to say, I had a red beard and mustache because it was just too difficult to shave with cold water.

And where did you take him? What did you do with him?

We turned him over to the United States military government, and they took care of him from there. He gave me a souvenir which I have today, a Yugoslavian note, 20 something, which I still have.

Then you mentioned that you liberated someone else.

Oh yeah, a little 10 or 12-year-old redheaded Polish boy, he and his German overseer, I guess, a woman who had him working on her farm.

And where was this approximately?

This was on the Czech border, either just before we got to Flossenbürg-- just what town I don't know. And we had taken this town and we were on the one side of it. We had taken over, commandeered a house, and we set up a machine gun nest on the outside, double up the fields and the road. And this little redheaded Polish boy and this German woman came up the road.

And we didn't realize it until he was able to talk with somebody in the squad that he was a slave laborer on this farm and he was under this woman. So he said he wanted to go back home. I don't know where home was. I don't remember, but we gave her strict instructions. He said he had to go back and pick up some things that he had, and we gave her strict instructions that if anything happened to him, we would be after her. She wouldn't live to tell.

What was her attitude towards what was happening?

In what respect? You mean the GIs, or the--

Towards the GIs and towards the fact that you were liberating her slaves, so to speak.

Yeah, she didn't know what to do because she walked in the town upon us. And I don't think that she was too happy about the whole deal, but the next day, he came down with fresh eggs for us and everything else that she had sent down,

right. And he had his little package of clothes. We gathered all the money that we had in the squad.

This is all the liberated German money that we had taken from all the POWs. We gave it to him and sent him on his way home. I don't know whatever happened to him. Never heard from him or saw him again. I wouldn't know him if I saw him.

Did you ever know his name or the name of [BOTH TALKING]?

I never knew his name, no. I could not converse with him. One of the guys, one of the other fellows could.

How did he respond to the Americans?

Oh, he was delighted. He was delighted to see us. We wanted to turn him over to the American military government, but he didn't want to. He wanted to go back home. I don't know what he found or where home was. I know it was in Poland. That's all I know.

Mm-hmm. Was he Jewish?

Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge.

OK. Now can you describe the approach to the concentration camp?

It was early in the morning and the sun had risen. And we were coming down a macadam road. As things would have it, being a scout as classification of infantry, I was working the left point that morning, and we approached the town of Flossenbürg. There was no gunfire. We suddenly saw a lot of white flags, and we proceeded up the road. And of course--

Where were these white flags hanging from?

From the houses and so forth of the town. It wasn't much of a town at that time. And there was a stone quarry on one side of the cobblestone road, as I remember, and on the other side was an Me 109 factory. And at the end of the road was the concentration camp, up above and to the right of the stone quarry, above the stone quarry on the right.

Was it within walking distance of the center of the town?

Oh, yes. My goodness, yes, if you can call that a town. I don't know how many houses were there. I know I didn't see very many German people.

How did the camp look from the outside?

They had a double fence, like a no man's land in between where the towers, machine guns could train up and down or dogs could run, whatever they wanted. They had electrification wires around, and of course barbed wire all over the place. I don't remember too much about the buildings. I can't recall other than going into the SS headquarters up at the end of the camp. I remember doing that. I remember going down into the room or building where they had the showers.

Could you describe that?

Could I describe it?

What did the building look like from the outside?

Just an ordinary brick building.

And did you go inside?

Yes, I went inside.

And what did you see as you came in?

All I can remember seeing are showers, but they tell me that there were gas hoods in there. Now, I don't recall seeing the description that the man gave this morning or yesterday morning about the little-- but it's possible that they were there. I remember seeing showerheads coming out of the walls, and they could have been in there too. I don't really know.

What were the walls made of?

That's a good question. I really don't remember.

Do you remember the color?

The color. It seems to me it was a drab gray or on that order.

Were they tile walls or plaster walls?

That, I can't remember.

How large was the room?

Oh, I guess maybe 10 foot by maybe 15, 18 feet, something like that.

What did the door look like?

The door was a metal door, as I recall.

Were there any markings inside the room, on the walls?

Not that I recall. There may have been, but I don't recall seeing any.

How about on the outside?

On the outside.

On the door, above the door?

I don't recall seeing any of that. I know we found two parts of \$1 bills laying in the camp. I also remember that we were under strict orders-- I don't know who thought of it, but under strict orders to give them none of our K-rations.

Was the reason given for that?

Yes.

What was that?

We would kill them.

Mm-hmm. Can you describe the people whom you saw in the camp, the survivors?

Well, as I wrote earlier, an emaciated mass of humanity. That's about it. They were more dead than alive. They were crying. Some of them were crying. Some of them had no emotion whatsoever. They were so far gone, I would say,

because as I remember, after we moved in, we called the medical units in right away, and we lost so many after we had liberated the camp in addition to what had died as we were liberating it.

Even though there was no gunfire, in their anxiety, they trampled one another trying to get out the gates and things of this nature. And we had to try to confine them, keep them within the camp so we could help them.

How did the American soldier who came upon this, and he had to cope with the disorder that resulted? How was he able to cope with both problems, with his own feelings and with the disorder?

I don't know. I don't know how I coped with it, speaking for myself.

What did you do?

What did I do?

Yes, what action did you take?

The only action that I myself took in reference to these people was to try to assure them that everything was going to be all right, my action, because I couldn't talk to them, I couldn't converse with them in any way-- maybe only sign language, and that's very laborious-- and turning them over to the medics as quickly as possible. As I say, the medics were in there right after we were in.

Were there men and women?

There was men and women, yes.

Children?

I can't recall, but I recall a pile of shoes and half of a cone, and I helped the officer measure them. Now, I say shoes, but actually, they were like clods, what we call clods today. The base was 30 feet across and it was 30 feet high, and it was in half of a cone, a conical shape. I also remember the ovens. I believe there was three of them with a metal doors.

We dragged the body out , this other fellow and myself. We believe, or at least I believe today, that he wasn't dead, but I can't be sure.

You mean there was a body in one of the ovens?

In one of the ovens, that's right.

And you removed it?

That's correct, yes.

Were you able to tell the nationality of any of the prisoners?

I couldn't, no.

And had any idea how many there were?

That, I couldn't tell you either.

Were there hundreds, thousands?

Oh, golly. I wouldn't even begin to estimate.

What were they wearing?

Most of them were wearing prison garb, the striped. There were some that had other dilapidated clothes of sorts.

Did anyone have particular emblems or symbols?

I didn't notice.

On their clothing.

I didn't notice. I can't say that there weren't. I didn't notice.

How about tattoos, numbers or other symbols that they may have received as a prisoner identification?

I didn't see any. I didn't see any.

Did you see any evidence that they might have been working in that camp?

Oh, I took one of the other GIs and myself, being that I was involved in aircraft. We were under orders not to go in there, but we went in. We snuck in anyway, and I took him on a tour of that factory where they produced those 109s right next door, or across the street from the camp, or to the camp on the back end. I don't really know.

And in the concrete floors, this is something that struck me beyond all belief. The concrete floor at the benches where these people worked had shallows in them, or holes in them, if you will, right, to the depths of three or four inches. And it was hard for me to conceive how somebody could work that many hours at a bench and dig holes in concrete with those clods, but that's what was there in the floor.

You felt that those holes were made by the clods scraping against the floor?

That's right, from them moving their feet on the floor while they stood there and operating whatever the case may have been in the form of making these aircraft.

Was the machinery in place?

Yeah. Oh, yes, everything was intact.

And you were able to recognize what kind of work was being done there?

Oh, yes, uh-hu. I saw what some of the underground did as far as, for example, the rivets to rivet the structures together, the first couple of inches on these little kegs about so high, the first couple of inches, all the rivets were exactly the same. Under that, it was a hodgepodge, so that after they use the first maybe 1,000 rivets or 500 rivets, whatever it may have been, they had to stand there pick out the right ones in order to get the right ones for the job.

Were you able to speak to any of the prisoners, communicate with them about this particular aspect?

Oh, I didn't let on that I was in there. I was under orders not to go in there.

How much area did this camp take up? How big was it?

I couldn't begin to tell you. I was there roughly two days, three at the most, and I don't know how big it was. I know that the square in town was dug up by the German people, and all the people that we knew, or all the bodies that were there, were buried in single graves marked with white crosses and the names, the sex, the religion, as near as we could find out, was on all of them. There were several, of course, that had nothing but male or female. We just couldn't.

How were you able to determine these facts about the dead people?

I didn't determine. I wasn't involved in it. This was the military government that came in, the American military government that did it, and how they determined it, I don't know.

Did you attend the burial ceremonies?

No, I did not. I don't recall where I was at the time.

How do you know about the burials?

Because I went back to the square and saw it.

When was that?

Oh, this was right in the same time period.

The camp, the official date of liberation for that camp is April 23.

Yes, I didn't know that until today. I thought it was later.

How long after that do you think it was that you came? How many days did you spend there initially?

I was there two to three days. Now, during that period, the military government came in, and during that period, the bodies were buried. Now, you talk about a ceremony or a funeral. I did not know of this until you spoke of it today. Now, it had to take place while I was there or while I was in the area, but I don't recall it.

Who dug the graves? Do you know that?

Yeah, the German townspeople. At the time I was there, the military government issued an order that they had to put in one day of eight hours maintaining that cemetery every year.

Mm-hmm. Did you see them digging the graves?

In the back of my mind, I have a vague recollection of it, but I can't be sure.

Mm-hmm. Right, OK. Did you have any particular instructions about your dealings with the survivors in the camp?

The only thing we were told-- we came upon it by sheer accident, the same as so many others. We didn't know it existed, and all of a sudden it was there. But we did get orders, as I said before, no food. Now, I don't know who is responsible for this, but don't give them any K-rations because it would have killed them. There's no question about it, because that was all concentrated food.

Did you have any further experiences after your experiences at Flossenbürg with liberated people or survivors that you feel might be important?

I can't recall at this moment anybody or anything that I can remember when I left Czechoslovakia. I remember a woman calling, come back and see us.

How'd you feel about that?

I felt overjoyed. Oh, yes, there is one thing. Yes, I had a great fortune-- I call it a great fortune-- because I ended up for one month at the Nuremberg trials as a GI, and I stood guard on most of the bigwigs from time to time.

How did you feel about that, John?

I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. Oh, yes.

I don't imagine that you spoke to any of the prisoners.

Oh, yes I did.

Really?

Oh, yeah.

And what was the nature of your conversations?

Well, one of them started screaming. And I don't know if you know one by the name of Funk. He started screaming one night, and so I just opened the door and took the billy club off the wall, told him in his language, if he didn't shut up, I'd shut him up.

Did he shut up?

He shut up. He didn't say another word.

What was their attitude towards the trial?

I really can't express that, because, well, I had an interesting experience with Seyss-Inquart. I don't know if you know him.

Mm-mm.

No? OK. Seyss-Inquart was the Austrian lawyer who worked behind the scenes for the Anschluss, it was so called, of Austria to Germany. And I had to take him one night down to see his lawyer. He had requested it. And during the interview, sitting at the table as I sit talking to you, my prisoner<sup>0</sup> sat on my left, Seyss-Inquart. And his lawyer was brought in and sat on my right.

And after they were talking back and forth, I asked the lawyer in German for the pencil, because I had to sign a slip. And he and Seyss-Inquart turned white, and the reason I turned white was because they realized that here, somebody sat who understood quite a bit of German, and what he was telling him was, blame Goering because they're going to hang him anyway. Blame everything on him.

What was the outcome of the trial with Seyss-Inquart?

Seyss-Inquart was hung along with, oh, 12 others. Goering committed suicide. I don't know how he escaped with that cyanide capsule, but he made it somehow. And the others, of course, with the exception of Hess, were in for various years. Speer, I think, put in 20 years. Hess is still in. Hess, by the way, was one of those fanatics. He would goosestep in that cell for hours at a time.

You saw that?

I saw that, and I saw one thing other. I was the only one that I know of in American uniform that ever went up to the visitor's gallery to sit in on the trials. I never saw anybody else.

There were no other American GIs in the gallery?



No. No, I tried to talk some of the people that I knew, some of the GIs that I knew, and they said, hey, you're up there 24 hours at a stretch. Why do you want to go back on your time off? I was the only one.

Why did you feel it was important to go?

Why? History was being made right before our eyes, and these were the people that were responsible for me and millions of others leaving home to straighten out a mess that they had started, all right. That's why I was there.

Well, it's our good fortune that you have such a good sense of history, and we thank you very much for participating in this project.

OK, Thank you.

Thank you.

This is Bonnie [? Gurowich. ?]