

Shall I start? This is Ray Kaner from the Center for Holocaust Studies, 1609 Avenue J, Brooklyn, interviewing Dr. George Tievsky, a liberator-- a medical liberator of concentration camp Dachau. Doctor, could you tell me, when you entered the army, did you enlist or you were drafted, and your rank and everything else pertaining to these questions?

I volunteered immediately following my internship in January of 1944. My service in Germany I was in late '44. I was a captain in the Medical Corps attached to the 66th field hospital of the 7th army. This is a mobile surgical unit, and consisted of only 60 beds.

We saw the most critically wounded. We saw the most terrible, terrible wounds that can be inflicted during wartime. And we were with the forward area. We, at the cessation of hostilities, were near Munich in a pleasant, green meadow. We were ordered from there on May 2 to proceed to the town of Allach, which is near Dachau.

Our unit was ready within two hours to receive patients. The reason for our sudden order to go to Allach was because of a typhus epidemic at Dachau. We were inundated. The unit had only 11 nurses and about 13 physicians. It was a subcamp of Allach-- of Dachau, rather. Dachau was a complex. And patients were sent directly from the main compound at Dachau to Allach.

Could you tell me, describe your feeling when you enter Dachau, seeing all these injured soldiers that you took care of while fighting in the war, seeing all what happened to your friends, to the people you came from the United States to the army, and after this, you entered Dachau. What was your reaction to see another way of dying?

There was no comparison-- no comparison. These were two different worlds. This was another world. This was another planet. I will read to you a letter dated May 10, 1945, written to the girl back home who was to become my wife.

"Today, I visited Dachau. It is, without a doubt, the most loathsome place I have ever seen. One can feel death itself there in its most repulsive form. There is something indescribably horrible about the place. It is almost incredible to think that human beings could systematically kill other human beings by the hundreds of thousands as if they were so much cattle. Until one sees something like this with one's own eyes, there is a small element of doubt. Because it is so very difficult for us to conceive of anything like this.

"But today, I saw with my own eyes the pile of human dead stacked like so many bundles of wheat. The piles were not as high as yesterday, for the furnaces are whittling them down. I saw the furnaces also, and men stoking the furnaces with coal, so as to keep them hot enough for cremation. One of the former prisoners volunteered his services to show me about the crematorium. I met him at the gas chambers.

"These were at one end of the long building which contained the furnaces. And there were about eight or 10 of them, each holding a few persons. After death, the bodies were then crated to the furnaces, or if they were too full, to a small building where they were stored. At least they were supposed to have been stored there.

"When the Americans first came, they found hundreds of bodies piled on the ground outside the crematorium. The crematorium building is enclosed by a high wall, and is set as if in a small park, with winding lanes and tall trees. Small, house-like boxes dotted the grounds, and I asked my guide what they were. In these, the vicious dogs of the camp were housed. These dogs were especially trained to take part in the torturing of the prisoners.

"We did not visit the other portions of the camp. We could see it well through the barbed wire, and the former prisoners who are being kept there, now for quarantine purposes. It resembles the camp at which we are now stationed, Allach. And I am sure that the same indescribable living conditions were present there. In the square of the main camp area, The flags of America, Russia, Britain, and France are now flying. Two American evacuation hospitals are giving medical care to the personnel of the camp.

"I have written of the patients we are receiving here already. In our several days of operation, three have died, and there will be many more. 3/4 of them have tuberculosis. We are X-raying all of them, not that we will be able to do anything for those who have the disease. Sanatoria will be needed, but to protect our own personnel and the non-infected patients.

"There are many cases far advanced which have only a few months ahead of them. And of course, all are severely malnourished, and many present the classical signs and symptoms of vitamin deficiencies-- textbook pictures. Almost all have severe diarrhea, as the result of tuberculosis infection of the gastrointestinal tract, or as part of the picture of vitamin deficiency and malnutrition."

You described it all, Dr. Tievsky. Nobody could do better than this. And I wouldn't go in-- you should describe more about it. I would just like to go into questions. When you saw these very sick people-- some people went through six years of this suffering that you just described. Because for these people didn't come just from Dachau. Many of them were in ghettos. They started the war already in 1939. Did you as a doctor expect these people to survive, live, and be mentally and physically able to continue a normal life, to pick up a normal life?

What surprised me was a tremendous vitality of the human body, both physically and psychologically. I was tremendously surprised at this.

According to the books that you have learned many, many years to become a doctor, did you ever find a place that they would describe that a person, after going through all this, will be normal-- maybe scarred inside, but normal, and function normal?

There is no-- there is no way to make this kind of a comparison, because there has never been this kind of a situation. Again, I say that the vitality and the resiliency of the human being amazed me. In a matter of a few days, or a week, or two weeks, with food-- and we had to give them liquid food at first-- but with food, and most importantly with tender loving care, we saw people just blossom so quickly.

It was-- I think the nursing of the nurses was so wonderful. The doctors were so wonderful. The technical personnel were so wonderful. And the response of the people to this, I think, was as important as the food that they got.

You see, as a survivor, I saw this. As a survivor, I appreciated that every person, medical person, was happy to save another human being. Just a few weeks before that, people didn't count. 100,000s, they didn't care, the Germans, for the people. That's why the liberation was so wonderful-- to see that there's still a world, a free world, coming in, that they care for somebody else, that they have this compassion to deal with this, what was going on.

I also would like to speak to you and ask you, you meeting a lot of survivors of concentration camps in World War II, how is their mental state?

I think that they function tremendously well. I know many of them, many who have attained a significant position in this community in Washington D.C. where I live. I know many of them throughout the country. And they have done exceptionally well.

There are some, of course, who have problems. But in the main, I would say that I come back to what I said before. The vitality and the resiliency of the human body and mind is a wonderful thing to behold.

Now, I would like also as a doctor, an educated person, to ask you, how do you account-- when we speak here about people-- I'm here since 1946-- and we see crime, dope addiction, and it's-- I always hear because the people were in a bad environment, because the people didn't have a good start. How do you account for all these young people, like myself, that started the War 10 years, 12, 13-- six years of all this, of this killing-- how do you account that these people didn't become criminals?

I will answer your question with a story. In past years, patients who came into my office with a tattoo on their arm, I asked what camp, what lager were you in? One day, a man said, Allach. We both blanched. I invited him, his wife, to our home for Shabbat. And then he told me a story.

He said, the day that the guards fled Allach, he and some of the others left, found a car, commandeered the car. And as they were driving down the road, they saw the commandant of the camp walking. They seized him and put him in the

car. And then they drove through the Schwarzwald, through the Black Forest. And as they drove, they began discussing in what way they could kill him to prolong his agony for the greatest length of time.

And as they drove through the night, they decided just to kill him. And as dawn came, they decided that if they killed him, they would be no better than the Nazis. And they turned him over to the authorities. And the answer to that question is our Judaic tradition.

We have a tradition that is almost 4,000 years old. And this tradition is burned into our soul. And that is why we have been able to survive through all types of tortures, humiliations, cruelties, expulsions, and we have not become criminals. And that is the answer to your question.

Doctor, could you tell me, what was your feeling, as a Jew, coming into a camp that the inmates were mostly Jewish?

Let me answer that with another story. I walked into my ward one day. And I said to an enlisted man who is Jewish, shalom aleichem. And he said, aleichem shalom. And all of the patients applauded. And I thought, well, maybe they didn't know that I was Jewish.

But years later, someone pointed out to me, that may have been, but they applauded because you were a free Jew all of this time. And my feeling to them being Jewish, there was a bond. Of course there was a bond. There had to be a bond. It was tremendous-- it would have been traumatic enough if these had not been Jews. But it was tenfold traumatic because they were Jews.

Now, I would like to ask you another question. Being a doctor, how did you deal with helping the Germans? I'm sure there were sick Germans that you had to take care of. Would you answer this?

Well, this is part of our profession. We have to take care of the sick and the injured, regardless-- regardless. If an SS officer would have come under my care, I would have had great emotional problems. But I could not have abandoned him. I could not have done it.

Did you come across Germans?

Yes.

After, in Dachau when you stayed there? How long did you stay in--

Six weeks. I walked the streets of the pleasant, pretty little village of Dachau. And the sky was blue, and the sun shone, and the birds sang. And I looked at the people walking in the street, at the BÃ¼rgers with their wives, on a Sunday while dressed. And I could smell the smell of the death camp. And I said to myself, how can this be? How can these people walk around like this, live like this, exist in this world, and yet they know-- they have to know that there is death just two miles away?

Also another question that I would like to know, when you were in the United States, before you came to Europe, did you know what's going on in Europe with the concentration camps, labor camps, ghettos?

I knew that there were concentration camps. But no one knew. All we knew that-- all we knew was that Jews were being herded into concentration camps. About extermination camps, about how the Jews were treated, we knew that they were being brutally treated. But beyond that, we did not know. There was no psychological preparation, if that is what you mean.

This is what I would like to know.

There was no psychological preparation--

Did they lecture you before you entered to the camp? Was this the only camp you liberated?

Yes. Yes. No, there was no lecture.

Did they prepare you for this disaster?

No, no. This was a military activity. We were ordered to go there. Nobody-- the commanding officer didn't know what we were going to see. We didn't know what we were going to see.

You see, the question is always we waited so long to be liberated. We also-- we're all just very surprised that nobody destroyed Auschwitz. Nobody destroyed Buchenwald, Dachau. Why? You had maps. Why was it that-- we didn't care to die. We wanted to die, just that we wanted they should die, too. We should-- at least if you would disrupt this bringing in. Because Hitler concentrated constantly on these trains to drag the slave labor, the people, the prisoners, the Jews mainly, from one camp to the other. Why didn't anybody do something?

We did not know. The knowledge of the death camps was here in the United States in the President's office, and the Secretary of State in 1944. Jan Karski-- are you familiar with his name? Jan Karski was a Polish courier for the underground. He was also a courier for the Jews of Poland. And he told me and a group that he brought-- he was-- first of all, he smuggled himself into a small extermination camp in Estonia. And he saw with his own eyes the gas chambers. And he said, I could stand it for only 15 minutes. He had to leave.

He brought-- and I should say he was sent to America with photographs and documentation of the extermination camps. And he produced these to the highest authorities. He told me of his experience with Felix Frankfurter, Chief Justice Frankfurter. He told him, I have come to tell you about the extermination of German Jewry. And Frankfurter said, I do not believe you. He said, I have the documents and the photographs. And he looked at them. And he said, do not show me anymore.

The news, the knowledge was suppressed because it was feared that it might impede the war effort, I am told. I do not know why it was suppressed. So we did not know here, in this country. The Jewish community did not know.

Didn't believe, because I understand the New York Times had articles.

The New York Times articles--

The Time magazine came out with articles.

They-- these articles, I will have to quote the New York Times correspondent. When he saw his first extermination camp, he wrote--

Which year was this?

1945. New York Times articles before that were about concentration camps. But they did not-- they did not know the extent. They did not know the enormity of this crime. They did not know the abyss.

You see, because this was the outcry of ours. We knew that, in the ghetto, that many people could have been saved if Russia wouldn't have stayed at the Vizsla six months. Because this was the time when we were sent to Auschwitz.

And--

The world didn't do anything.

Auschwitz was not bombed--

No.

--because it was felt not to be a military target by Franklin Roosevelt.

Well, I can't agree with him. He was a great President. But he could have done, I think, better for people that were in prisons.

But he also refused his wife Eleanor's request for the admission of 1,500 Jewish children to the United States.

Was this the time of the ship that came from-- in the beginning?

I don't recall the exact date.

The St. Louis?

No, I don't know. I don't know the exact date. But I do know-- let me say this. I think we had, fundamentally, a political problem here. The Jewish vote was in Franklin Roosevelt's pocket. 99% of Jews voted for--

Why wasn't there any resistance, strike, demonstration for us?

Wait a minute, wait a minute. Wait a minute now. I'm talking now in terms of the Depression years. I'm talking in terms of a terrible depression in this country. I'm talking in terms of a President who came-- of a country where banks were closing, of people who were unemployed, of people of where there were bread lines. There were headlines in the paper of a remote war in Europe.

Remember, we had our problems with the American Firsters, who wanted to have nothing to do with involvement in Europe, who wanted to keep us out of war. We had a terrible division in this country.

I know. I heard about it, including Joseph Kennedy, President Kennedy's father.

Right. Jews are liberals. Franklin Roosevelt was a liberal who proposed liberal social programs. And they voted for Roosevelt. A politician is a politician. If he had not had their votes, or half of their votes, perhaps that would have made a difference. I don't know.

You see, as a survivor, and as a person that lost most of the family in Europe, I feel it was an outrage that the whole world, nobody wanted to take the Jews in. The Germans claimed, if nobody wanted you, why should we?

All right, I will answer that by saying this-- that in the years 1942 to 1945, in Christian Western world, this happened. No country would admit the Jews-- no country. Anti-Semitism had been in existence for 2000 years almost. This was anti-Semitism.

You think this was a part-- a role that played? This was anti-Semitism?

There is no question. There is no question anti-Semitism has its roots, unfortunately, in Christianity. They blamed us for the death of their Lord. But I will say this, the late Pope John said anti-Semitism is another thorn in the bleeding body of Christ. That was a pope that said this. So there is hope.

But I will tell you another story, if I have time. I was at Dachau, and a young enlisted man came to my tent. And he said, I have to speak to you. And he came in, and he was weeping-- crying tears. And I said, what's the matter? He said-- and he was a Jewish enlisted man-- he said the men in my squad tent are Jew-baiting me.

This was at Dachau. And every one of these men had seen the patients, had seen-- many of them had seen the dead. And when that young Jewish boy told me that the Christians were Jew-baiting him, then I knew that this would not-- anti-Semitism would not end because of the Holocaust.

May I ask you, in your opinion, did the world learn a lesson? Seeing what you saw, do you think this could happen

again?

I do not think the world learned a lesson. I think it could happen again.

Any place in the world?

Let me tell you why I say this. There is a Swiss dramatist by the name of Durrenmatt. And he wrote a play called The Visit. The play is centered in central Europe. It is about a man who is a great favorite in the town and is to be elected mayor.

And a wealthy woman comes back to the town who lived there at one time, who had been wronged by him. And suddenly, in this impoverished town, money begins to flow. And very gradually, the people who loved this young man begin looking at him differently. And then she offers each one of them a large sum of money if they will kill him. And they kill him. This, in microcosm, is what happened to the Jews in Germany.

Second, the psychological aspect-- there is a psychologist who did a very famous experiment. "Obedience to Authority" was the name of the experiment. And he had an actor strapped into a chair, such as this, with electrodes. And he had volunteers give the actor varying degrees of electrical shock until an almost lethal-- theoretically lethal point was reached, and the actor reacted tremendously with pain. And by the authority of the individual who was directing this, he was able-- he was able to get almost every person to turn the dial to the lethal point.

He worked with many different groups. He began with a student group. Then, he advertised in a newspaper for groups. And he worked even with professionals. And he found that there is the capacity in human beings-- there was only one who refused, a minister. There is the capacity in human beings for cruelty under the proper conditions.

We have very little time. So I would like to ask you my last question. And this is, was what you saw after the war, being in Dachau, did this change your thinking, your way of life, your person? What effect did this have on your personal life?

It reinforced my Judaic feeling. I am very committed. I am active in the leadership in this community. I am a Zionist. I have been to Israel many times.

Aside from that, I cannot say that it consciously affected my personal life. I repressed these memories for 35 years. When they come up, I am quite disturbed. I am sleepless, and I will not sleep well tonight.

I want to say thank you for your interview.

It was a pleasure.

Thank you.

OK, [INAUDIBLE] time out.

Thank you so much.

How was it?

[AUDIO OUT]