

Tape two, side one:

PS: We are continuing the interview with Mr. Bertram Kornfeld, for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is still May, May, March the 7th. Mr. Kornfeld, we were speaking, oh, this is the beginning of tape two, side one. At the end of tape one, side two we were discussing the treatment of prisoners, whether or not the Germans adhered reasonably well to the terms of the Geneva Convention. Then we were speaking about the lot of officer prisoners, officers of the Allied Armies. And could we continue on that, Mr. Kornfeld?

BK: I don't really know anything except what I read after the war.

PS: There were very few if any officers.

BK: We don't know of any officers...

PS: Right.

BK: ...among the Americans certainly. The British doctor was an officer, but I don't know how he got there.

PS: You had work details? Daily responsibilities of work details?

BK: No, not really. The only work detail we had was to go out and pick wood, which we did as many times as we could. That was stopped, because we, once in early April I think it was, we went out and we saw an American fighter plane overhead. And it was the first, live, real American we had seen. He was low enough that we waved to him, and apparently he misunderstood, and he thought we were a German work detail and he strafed us. And we all jumped into the ditch and he strafed the ditch and two of our guys were killed.

PS: Oh!

BK: So, but other than that, no work details that, that I was put on.

PS: During the period, that long period of your confinement in *Stalag IV*, were there many, would you say, of your fellow prisoners who were very seriously ill or wounded who did not receive adequate medical attention?

BK: Yes, true. I don't know of the seriously wounded, because most of them didn't get to the camp. They were either sent to, hopefully, to a hospital. I don't know what happened to them.

PS: Yeah.

BK: There were quite a number of sick prisoners of war. Most of them survived somehow. I only know of one who didn't survive, and his story sounds worse today I guess than even in those days. He was a heavy smoker. And he used to trade the slice of bread that he, we got for cigarettes. He died smoking, happily.

PS: Also, reviewing this period of incarceration, do you think there were many of your fellow prisoners who were Jewish?

BK: It's hard to tell.

PS: Yeah.

BK: I know of two.

PS: Right. But they did not receive any--their experience was as your experience?

BK: Same as mine. They survived.

PS: Yeah.

BK: You know, we...

PS: But they were never mistreated because of religion?

BK: No.

PS: I was anxious to...

BK: I know, and I'm glad to be able to say to you...

PS: Yeah. Well...

BK: We were, but I, again I don't know what happened in other camps. I can only speak for this one. And of course, the other thing is that this was going toward the end of the war. A lot of things could have happened earlier...

PS: Really.

BK: ...that I'm not aware of. You know, it's so easy to mistreat a prisoner of war and nobody ever finds out about it.

PS: As a prisoner of war, you were registered under your, the name Bertram Kornfeld. The reason I ask that was, your family was notified that you were...

BK: My family was notified in January of 1945 that I was missing in action. And they did not know until almost the day we were liberated, just before, no, as a matter, I'm sorry, it was after we were liberated that they found out.

PS: So that was almost about four or five months.

BK: Five months.

PS: That they naturally would assume that you probably had been killed.

BK: All that they knew was I was missing in action.

PS: Yeah.

BK: They knew the whole story by that time with the Bulge. I guess the good part for them was that nobody else had heard.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And nobody, nobody was notified of, well, let's put it this way. The War Department notified you if you were killed.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And if you weren't...

PS: You were missing.

BK: ...you were just missing in action. So as long as you're missing in action there's hope for a return.

PS: You mean there was no agency such as the Red Cross responsible for, after all they all, they knew probably the Red Cross and/or Germany had a list of all that...

BK: Yes, but the communication had broken down by that time. And I think the Red Cross was severely handicapped, particularly toward the end of the war in what they could do. My mother found out that, she always told that story that the, the mailman was sorting out mail in the middle of the night for delivery early the next morning. And when he saw the telegram from the War Department, he opened it, and he ran right over to her apartment and told her.

PS: Boy is that something.

BK: In fact I got, I wrote many letters home, and I received them all. Most of them came...

PS: Oh.

BK: ...came in July and August.

PS: You never--I was gonna ask you that. Next, so you were not really in constant--they did not receive anything at all that would give them reasonably that you were still living.

BK: Nothing whatsoever.

PS: Nothing at all.

BK: No, no.

PS: All the letters you wrote...

BK: In fact all the letters I wrote, when I got them, I wrote fabulous letters of how wonderful things were.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Yeah, you know. I lied, well.

PS: Wasn't there, was there any agency responsible such as Red Cross for supervising to some extent the delivery of packages and mail?

BK: Well, the packages as I said before, we did get one package. But by that time it--things just couldn't get through. So there was one package among I think 25 of us, which didn't amount to very much, except that it, it gave us the hope that there are people out there who were aware of us.

PS: So at the time of your escape, really more escape than liberation, you had already mentioned that your physical condition was, number one, a loss of about 50 pounds.

BK: Yes.

PS: What was your mental condition at that point? Now, at that point you were what, about 20, 20 years old?

BK: I was 20. I was 19, 19-and-a-half, yeah. Mental condition? I think we were in great shape. And what kept us going was talking about all the wonderful things we have back in the States.

PS: To look forward to.

BK: To look forward to, yes.

PS: Did you notice very much difference between your age group, say 18 to 25 or so, and the older, the oldest men who were among your fellow...

BK: I really don't remember anybody older, except a couple Frenchmen. For some reason we became friends with them, and they were older because they had been there since almost the beginning of the war. Any difference? No.

PS: No.

BK: I mean, if you're looking for a difference between those of us who were only there for five months, and those who had been there for almost five years...

PS: Were you all integrated within the camp? That is...

BK: Oh no, no.

PS: With Russians...

BK: No, no.

PS: Americans?

BK: The Americans were on one side.

PS: Oh, oh.

BK: And the British...

PS: Yeah.

BK: But I think maybe it's, the British and the Americans were together, but the French were on one sector and the Russians...

PS: And the Russians...

BK: ...they were way out in left field somewhere.

PS: And all during this period, your family, friends had no, no evidence as to your state of being or non-being or...

BK: Right. Yeah. Not until after liberation.

PS: Now, when you escaped, your, the first, your first contacts excuse me, were with Russian soldiers. When did you first reach what could be described as the British or U.S....

BK: The Americans. We finally got to the Elbe River. That's, was the meeting point. We, we got to the Elbe River, but north of the meeting point, between the Russians, you know, the famous...

PS: Yeah.

BK: ...meeting point there. When we got to the Elbe River, we found that there was a canal, and the bridge, there was no bridge, but there was luckily a pipe across the canal. There was a Russian guard, and we walked up to him, and I started to talk to him to show him that we wanted to get across. We'll get, we'll sit on the pipe and make our way across. And he said, "Go." We made it to the main part of the Elbe River, and we started to walk toward a bridge that was totally down, across the Elbe, but luckily down in the shape of a V so that you could somehow cross. Part of it we had to swim, but not, a short distance. But the interesting thing was, when we looked back, there was another group of people who wanted to cross on that pipe, over the canal, and the Russian guard just literally shot them. I think they were Germans.

PS: Yeah.

BK: The Russians were, from what I could see, they liked to use their guns.
PS: I guess part of it was a reaction to German...
BK: What they had done to them!
PS: Use of guns to...
BK: Sure!
PS: They were...
BK: Let me--what the Germans did to the Russians, all the Russians wanted to do was get back at them.
PS: I think the Germans were encouraged to, to these acts of cruelty against the Russians.
BK: Yeah and...
PS: Whether they [unclear].
BK: As I said, you know, part of it's because the Russians never were part of the Geneva Convention.
PS: Yeah.
BK: So they didn't live up to any of the...
PS: And probably Russia did likewise...
BK: Oh I'm sure.
PS: ...to the German prisoners.
BK: Of course.
PS: Oh the cruelties that, it's just unbelievable. Can you describe or relate some of your feelings and what, for instance, when was your first contact with British or Americans?
BK: The Americans? Well, we crossed the Elbe River, climbing up on the part of the bridge that was there, and then having to swim, I think it was swimming, because the Elbe river, from what I know now, is fairly deep in the center. Maybe we didn't swim, I don't know. Maybe we could just somehow get across to the other side and we made it to the western side of the river. And there was an American truck standing there. An American, real American truck, with American, I think there was an American doctor there. I don't know what they were doing. Well, we got the biggest welcome.
PS: Oh!
BK: And they got the biggest welcome from us! And they put us on the truck and they said, "We'll take good care of you." And they took us to the nearest airport, which was Leipzig. And, when we got there, we were treated royally. And then we all got sick.
PS: Heh, too much.
BK: Because, too much. And they fed us pork chops.
PS: Oh, and then...
BK: And everything rich.
PS: Your digestive system...
BK: Things we were not used to.

PS: Would not...

BK: So we wound up in the hospital there...

PS: Yes.

BK: ...for a few days. And then we, then the Americans [unclear]...

PS: Was that the American occupation?

BK: American occupation.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Because at that time, see the Americans got to the western side of the Elbe River. That's before they, before Yalta I guess, when the Americans then retreated and gave the Russians the whole eastern sector.

PS: You mean the Americans who reached that point, well the Yalta Agreement goes back to...

BK: No wait a minute, the Yalta came before the end of the war.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

BK: Right.

PS: Well before...

BK: But apparently at Yalta it was decided that no matter where...

PS: Yeah. Oh yeah that's...

BK: The Americans would be...

PS: Yeah.

BK: They would give the Russians that eastern sector.

PS: How long was it then, before, of course, there was no telephone certainly between there and the United States, but you immediately were able to write at least to your family?

BK: Write? Yes. What they told us was that, "Now that you're free and we know who you are, the War Department is going to notify your parents."

PS: Yeah.

BK: [unclear].

PS: That's when they received a telegram.

BK: That's right, yeah. How it worked out, I'm not sure, but I was in France and they sent us to a camp for rehabilitation. And I was in France for about ten days, eating nothing but chicken and egg nog. And that was it.

PS: And by then you could well accept it, that is your...

BK: Yes, by, you know, by that time that diet apparently was what was prescribed for us, and by the time we got on the ship to go back, I think we were in fairly good shape. I did wind up in the hospital at Fort Dix when we came back, because of some infection, you know, that I had. Every cut, for years, became infected, you know, even long after the war.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

BK: And that was one of them. And I was in the hospital. And I called home. And then they knew. That was the first time I called.

PS: Oh, at that time you could...

BK: Of course they had telephones, yeah.

PS: Oh yes, oh, you were back in...

BK: I was at Fort Dix!

PS: Yeah.

BK: It was not from...

PS: But from Europe they didn't give you any offer of a telephone call home...

BK: Well, in those days, calling from Europe was...

PS: Yeah, that was...

BK: ...a major undertaking.

PS: Right. And I don't...

BK: An expensive one, too.

PS: And there was no flying, no passenger service that...

BK: I don't think so. All I know is we came back on a Coast Guard ship, and that's how most of them got back.

PS: And you arrived in New York?

BK: We arrived in New York, yes.

PS: Then Fort Dix.

BK: Fort Dix, and then from there we were supposed to, not be discharged, but to go on a furlough.

PS: Yeah.

BK: They gave us an eight-week furlough, which was very nice.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Yeah, I was home for eight weeks. Then I had to go back in again.

PS: And then you were--by that time the Japanese had surrendered.

BK: They surrendered.

PS: Yeah, the...

BK: The Japanese surrendered in August.

PS: In August, yeah.

BK: And I was home at that time.

PS: Right. You were still on the eight-week furlough.

BK: I was still in the army. Oh yes.

PS: Then you returned to...

BK: I returned. I was sent to Virginia, Fort Pickett, Camp Pickett.

PS: Yeah, Camp Pickett.

BK: And there I was armour artificer again.

PS: Oh! You got...

BK: And I was discharged in December, in December of '45. The funny thing was, in 1950 they wanted me back again, for the Korean War.

PS: Oh, you were still young enough to...

BK: Yeah, sure.

PS: Well, your service during World War II certainly eliminated any possibilities, didn't it?

BK: I don't know! They sent me a letter to report. And luckily I was out of town that day. So by the time the letter came, I called them up. I said, "I got the letter. It said report yesterday." They said, "Send it back to us. We'll call you again." And I'm still waiting.

PS: And your family, were, your reunion must have been one wonderful, wonderful occasion.

BK: Oh sure, yeah.

PS: During that period, to bring up a, you know, very painful point, you lost family in Europe?

BK: Well, what we found out by that time, you know, we checked with the Red Cross and we found out that we lost quite, quite a number, that we had suspected all the time that, you know, some of them are relatives I knew. You know, aunts and uncles. This is what this list is all about. Aunts and uncles. Some are distant cousins of my parents. And I would say there are about 15 who died in concentration camps.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Yeah.

PS: We have reached the end of the planned questions that I had. Is there anything that we didn't cover, Mr. Kornfeld, that you would care to bring up before we...

BK: You keep, you keep asking, you know, about the Germans, whether they knew about being Jewish. I forgot to tell you. When we escaped from the Russians, we hitchhiked in a Russian truck. And we got on there, and there were benches on the, the truck. And we sat down. And I sat next to a Russian officer. And he asked me something in Russian, and I said to him, "I don't speak Russian. How about German?" And he spoke beautiful German. The first thing he asked me, "Are there any Jews in your army?" And I told him, "Of course there are." But I didn't like the tone of the voice he asked me.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

BK: So, two minutes later, I said to the driver, "We have to get off here." Because I did not trust...

PS: Yeah.

BK: One of the Russians I met.

PS: In asking that question, do you think he suspected that any of you, and he was hostile...

BK: I have no idea what the Russian's, his intent was.

PS: [unclear]. Yeah.

BK: I...

PS: And you didn't wait to find out.

BK: I didn't want to find out. Not the way I knew the Russians.

PS: Well, again, going back to your wonderful reunion with your family, and then the war ended. The Japanese had surrendered. Were you discharged shortly after that?

BK: I was discharged in December of '45.

PS: From where then? Fort Dix?

BK: Fort Mead.

PS: Oh. Obviously, Mead. We were...

BK: Short-...

PS: I was discharged there, in December...

BK: '45?

PS: Could be, of '4- [pause], yeah, sure.

BK: '45, yeah.

PS: Yeah. [unclear].

BK: I didn't see you there!

PS: Well, I think we've covered everything pretty well, Mr. Kornfeld.

BK: My pleasure to cover it.

PS: Oh, on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College, we certainly appreciate going through these pleasant and unpleasant memories. Your testimony certainly will be a wonderful contribution to our Archive. And on behalf of the personnel of our Holocaust Oral History Archive, I thank you very, very much.

BK: My pleasure.

PS: Thank you. Thank you.