

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HARRY ABRAMS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: December 9, 1988

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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HARRY ABRAMS [I-I-1]

HA - Harry Abrams [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: December 9, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing Mr. Harry Abrams, for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is December 9, 1988. Harry, can you please tell us where in Europe, and in what unit you were serving, before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

HA: I was a combat correspondent, attached to the 1st Army. We came into Weimar, which was a town right outside of Buchenwald. Weimar is the site of the "West Point" of Germany. When we got into Weimar, we were told that Buchenwald had been discovered, and the troops were now going into the concentration camp. I had to have special permission to go into Buchenwald, which I obtained with a good deal of difficulty, and Buchenwald is a camp which is about, within two miles of Weimar. The entrance to Buchenwald is a beautiful highway with tall trees and a very quiet atmosphere going up to it. And when we got into the area of Buchenwald, you could begin to sense that you were coming into something because of the bad odor that was coming out of it. The odor was of smoke and also of rotted flesh or whatever was coming out of the camp.

PS: Harry, prior to your arrival at Buchenwald, where did you first enter Germany? What area?

HA: Well I had come up from, with the 1st Army. I had started with them from Namur [Belgium] and was going on right from there. Previously I had been attached to other organizations, starting in Normandy and going all the way up, and eventually landing in Berlin. My job was to get, at that time, stories about the signal operations with the 1st Army.

PS: When you entered Germany, did you know of the existence of Buchenwald, the camp that you would eventually get to?

HA: I had no idea about Buchenwald. We had heard stories of other liberations as we came along, and we had come across some of the people who had been liberated. We had gone into various places like Lauenburg, where there had been concentration camps. Previous to that in, I had been in Le Mans and had visited the concentration camp that was there which was now being handled by the, our army, and were receiving prisoners from various camps throughout France and Belgium and so forth. And I had done stories on those.

PS: Before you arrived at the first concentration camp that you experienced, had you heard anything. Were you aware of the mass murder of Jews, of the gas chambers and ovens?

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HA: Yes, there were some rumors that were going around, but we hadn't, our, the outfit that I was with, which was the headquarters outfit of the 1st Army, hadn't actually come into contact with any of these groups.

PS: Did you, prior to that, see any evidence of German atrocities against civilians or prisoners of war or displaced persons?

HA: Not actually. Just the stories that we had received on the way.

PS: Now, the camp: you eventually arrived at Buchenwald, which had been liberated a few days prior, is that correct?

HA: Well, the day before.

PS: The day before. Do you recall the date, approximately the date that you arrived there?

HA: Geez, I don't remember the exact date.

PS: I think the official records, I think Buchenwald was liberated April 11th, 1945 I believe.

HA: Well that was it, yeah.

PS: So, you arrived there...

HA: It was in that area, yeah.

PS: Yeah.

HA: I was there, I'm sure I was in Weimar on the 11th.

PS: To the best of your memory, can you describe what you saw at the camp, when you entered, and what you felt? In connection with Buchenwald, and other, any other camps that you witnessed.

HA: Well, Buchenwald was a camp of horror. I mean, it was unbelievable. I had always thought that I had a very strong stomach. And after I'd been in there a short time I was very sick. And I really coughed up. I was taken on a tour of inspection, accompanied by an MP sergeant. And we walked by the place where the, they had taken the Germans that were there. There had some SS troops there.

PS: They were there when you...

HA: Yeah, they were there. They were captured.

PS: Yeah.

HA: And one of them looked at me and said something like, "*Juden*." And the sergeant that I was with, who was a former prize fighter, hit this guy and he splattered his nose all over the place. It was a beautiful sight.

PS: You mean, when you entered, you actually saw German...

HA: There were a few...

PS: German troops, German guards?

HA: There were a few Germans that had been put into a place on the side. And these fellows were wearing the swastikas.

PS: Did you witness a great deal of animosity on the part of the survivors toward these SS and *Wehrmacht* who were still in the prison?

HA: Well, the few survivors that we saw, they were still in the state of shock. And they were dying. I mean, they were, it was a horrible sight. I mean, the condition of these people was something that you couldn't believe. And it was just one of those things that you, they couldn't eat properly. They were, we really weren't equipped to handle them in the beginning. Later, stuff came in as I understand, but I had gone on. But a interesting thing, the picture of Buchenwald, and it was a very famous picture...

PS: I'll say!

HA: ...had headquarters on one side of it, but it was away from where the prisoners were. And then her house there,¹ where she was living, which was a small place. There was a room and on one end of the room was a picture of Hitler. And on the other end of that same room there was a crucifix. And this is something that I have never forgotten.

PS: No.

HA: Here was a person with all the horrors that she was involved with, that still had a crucifix handy.

PS: Can you estimate, oh, approximately how many prisoners were still living when you entered Buchenwald and how many were still, corpses that you saw?

HA: I have no idea the total of the prisoners there. And I didn't stay there too long. I was there maybe less than an hour all together.

PS: Did you see any children?

HA: See what?

PS: Any children among the survivors or dead?

HA: I saw no children.

PS: You arrived there the second day, the day after...

HA: The day after.

PS: At that point, were, had units arrived that were in a position to help these survivors? In other words, units who were equipped with medical supplies and food?

HA: There were people coming in and it was a very interesting thing. Before you could get in there you had to be subjected to shots and so forth, because of the viruses and so forth that you were subjected to. And, there were very few people who were getting in there, except those who were actually working with the, the camp.

PS: Yeah, who were...

HA: Yeah, they were...

PS: So they...

HA: They were probably qualified to handle the thing as far as anybody could be, and the soldiers were, that were in there were just indescribable how they felt about the whole situation, and the compassion they felt for the people.

PS: Do you think that this particular camp was originally set up for Jews only, or were mixed nationalities? Would you have any...

¹Reference to Ilsa Koch, wife of the camp commandant and an SS *Aufscherin* [overseer] who is alleged to have made objects from human skin. (Jewishvirtuallibrary.org)

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HA: I have...

PS: Knowledge or...

HA: An idea that they were mixed in there, but I think most of them were Jews.

PS: And you saw no children, either among the living or the deceased. Can you describe your personal resp-, well, responsibilities, if any, that you had been assigned to within the camp?

HA: Well, the thing that I was looking for were, was for the signal corps to come in and take pictures. And I was working with a, an officer there on that and he pinpointed places of interest that would later be shown in the pictures of that and come to the, throughout the world.

PS: The signal corps pictures were being taken for general use throughout the news media? Or just for military, for, within the army?

HA: Well, they were historical pictures, and they were going to be, as I understood it, they were going to be shown, throughout the world. And they were pretty horrible pictures. And...

PS: Any mov-, were they mostly still shots, or moving pictures, or film?

HA: Well the signal corps people were taking still shots. And then another outfit came in just after I'd, I wasn't there at the time. They were taking movies of it. And I understand that these movies were going to be shown throughout the world. I mean, everybody was supposed to see what was actually going on there. This was a test case, and from what I understood later, that these pictures were shown throughout France and Belgium and Holland and England, and everywhere but in the United States. And then a few of them got into the newsreels, or something like that, but the whole picture was never shown to the people of the United States.

PS: You don't know what eventually happened to that film?

HA: No.

PS: It probably is in the archive.

HA: No...

PS: But...

HA: The only thing that I could say further is when we got back into Weimar, nobody knew anything about that concentration camp. So it was suggested at that time that the people that were in Weimar were to take a hike up to the camp, and all the people in Weimar from the ages I think about 10 to 65, were supposed to walk up to Weimar, eh, up to Buchenwald, and see certain parts of it. And this was done, I understand, within a week after I left. [tape off then on]

PS: Harry, when you entered Buchenwald it was actually the second day, but can you describe the reaction of the prisoners? Were they still in shock? If, you say there were Germans still left in the camp. But as far as the survivors, did you note the condition other than the physical, the horrible physical appearance.

HA: They wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. And some of them actually took off, because we saw them on the road later, as we were going back. And these people had gotten clothing, and I don't know where, and were looking for, or hitchhiking back. Some of them were in very bad condition.

PS: Was there any attempt to restrict, to hold them there until the distribution could be arranged?

HA: I think they wanted them to stay and be taken care of and get attention so...

PS: Yeah, but they were free to leave if they...

HA: But there were some that got out, I know, because we found a couple there, a couple men were going back to a place in Germany. But they wanted to get into Paris. I mean they were very educated people. And one of them was in very bad shape and we, they wanted us to give them a lift. We couldn't do it. But we did give them food and water and so forth. Actually I left my canteen there.

PS: Did you personally or any of your close friends in your unit make any attempt to communicate verbally with, or was there a language barrier?

HA: There was a language barrier as far as I was concerned.

PS: Could you communicate with any?

HA: We just, you know, waved at them and let them know that we were, you know, it was...

PS: Yeah.

HA: A very difficult situation.

PS: Did the experience of seeing these prisoners have any effect on your feeling about being a part of the war and fighting Germany?

HA: Well, I think that everybody that saw them like that felt that we were there for a very definite purpose. If there was any question about our being there, this certainly made it very clear that these people [the Nazis] had to be beaten.

PS: You have described your own feelings of shock when you saw this. Would you say that the other men in your unit all reacted about the same whether they were Jewish or non-Jewish or...

HA: I think so. I think it was a case of being, of unbelieving, I mean that anything like this could happen. I mean you go in there and you see corpses lying around there and you see bones that are piled up on boxcars. And then there was a place in there where they, they had a wall there, and the wall was, had protruding spikes from the back there, and we hadn't even actually seen it, but the story was that the people were put up against the wall there and they hammered the spikes through their heads. Now I had no real verifications of that, but it was there.

PS: At that point, had they started to dispose of the, probably the thousands of corpses that were scattered around through the area?

HA: I think so, yeah.

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PS: Now, one of the reasons I ask, Harry, is that in many places, especially those troops that were under General Patton, where the German civilians from the entire area were brought in and made to do all of the digging and burials, in most cases there was...

HA: I didn't see any sign of bringing civilians in there to do this at that time.

PS: How long did you remain within the concentration camp?

HA: I was in there less than an hour.

PS: Has it had a lingering effect on your thinking since that time?

HA: Oh yes!

PS: As you look back it definitely has had an influence on your thinking.

HA: Sure.

PS: At that time, you had seen Buchenwald, and you had seen a few others, but at that time, did you have any knowledge or any idea that that was only one of many? That there were thousands? You realized, say, in Buchenwald where probably thousands had been exterminated. But at that point did you realize that that was just one of many? That the total figure when all was done was in the area of 12, 13 million?

HA: No.

PS: In your own mind, can you explain German decisions that led up to the building and the setting of these concentration camps?

HA: Yes, I believe it will help, what led up to it. I mean it was just a series of things, but it was planned. I mean the whole thing was planned, to exterminate the Jews. And this was one way of doing it.

PS: And you had no idea, as all others, that there was such a large scale of the gassing and extermination.

HA: Not at that time, no.

PS: You never have seen any of the prisoners that you know of since that time. How long did you remain in Europe after the war?

HA: Well, I had a lot of points, and I left there in October, of '45.

PS: Is there anything else that we haven't covered, Harry, that you would care to add to your testimony?

HA: Well, there's not much. Of course when you were in Germany you never found, nobody was a Nazi among the civilian people. And we found out that they were very much like us, I mean the people themselves. More than any other country that we had been in. And it was just one of those things that, the idea of Germany, which is such a beautiful place, wanting more and more when they could have had so much right within their own borders is unbelievable.

PS: Probably the, one of the country in the world that was the highest culture, the educational and the arts and the sciences, and yet a culture that bred this horrible catastrophe and Holocaust. Okay. This concludes the interview by Phil Solomon with Harry Abrams, a U.S. army veteran who has given certainly very important and meaningful

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testimony. And on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archives, Harry, of Gratz College, I want to thank you very very much. Thank you.