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HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JOHN B. COULSTON

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: April 22, 1988

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JC - John B. Coulston [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: April 22, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: ...viewing Mr. John B. Coulston. The date is April 22nd, 1988. Mr. Coulston, will you please tell me where in Europe, and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

JC: Yes. We were with the, I was with the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, 3rd United States Army. I believe we oh, we spent most of our time with 12th Corps, excepting during the Bulge. We were tying with the 8th Corps, really. And then when we advanced, they resumed the advance again, I believe it was the 12th Corps.

PS: Did you know of the existence of the particular camp that you would later liberate before you arrived there?

JC: No.

PS: Before you arrived at the camp, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews and political prisoners in Europe?

JC: No. To the contrary, I had been worried and wondering. During the Bulge I met an underground leader who showed me various, various things that she had, she gave to peoples, evadees and escapees. And one was an OST[1]. And if you looked Slavic, she would have one of those sewn on your suit, and then if you looked Jewish, whether you were or not, she had a *Juden*, J-U-D-E-N, which she said was Jewish--the Jewish Star of Israel, of David. And I wondered why, my only wonder was why did they use a *Juden* instead of a *Juif*? J-U-I-F. And I wondered because I heard later of course that the Jews just even in Belgium were not allowed free, at that specific time.

PS: Do you recall, Jack, the approximate date that you first set foot on German soil?

JC: Yes, yes, yes. Bitburg. We were the clean up force with the 89th Division, and the 4th Armored Division who went through, and around February, sometime in early February, I believe, 1945.

PS: Early February. Then, the date that you came upon the first concentration camp was roughly about what date?

JC: The 4th of April, 1945 according to [unclear]…

PS: So there were a few months that you were fighting in Germany before you came upon the first concentration camp.

JC: Yes.

[1] Badge denoting a forced laborer from the East - *Ostarbeiter*. (ushmm.org)

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PS: During that period that you were fighting within Germany, did you see any examples of Nazi atrocities against humanity that possibly might have led you to expect what you later saw?

JC: That's extremely difficult to answer, because I saw atrocities in Germ--and France. But a difference between atrocities as I considered them, such as the burning of villages and killing the peoples in the cities and in the village, which I saw in France. Or it happened in France. My colonel saw it and then we stopped to secure the forces. I didn't think. All I could think of was that they were, pardon me, German bastards. [tape off then on]

PS: Jack, from the time you set foot on German soil, until you arrived at the site and saw the concentration camp, you say that you, really there was nothing that gave you an indication of the horrors that you were about to uncover. Did you in the meantime, in those weeks of fighting toward the site of your first concentration camp, did you come across any or many displaced persons or prisoners of war camps?

JC: No. Not until then. I did, on the way to Ohrdruf, come across an Italian and a Polish slave worker on farms. They worked on many farms in some towns just about 20 miles from Ohrdruf. But they were the first ones that I had ever seen.

PS: Now you give the name of the prison camp that you experienced the liberation as Ohrdruf. Can you repeat if possible, the, can you please repeat the date that you entered Ohrdruf?

JC: Yes, the 4th of April, 1945.

PS: '45, right. To the best of your memory, Jack, and I know from the experience you've had in speaking and reviewing all that happened, can you best describe what you saw at the camp and what you felt at the time?

JC: Yes. I have to combine what I know about from my letters home and minor part, memory, because memory cannot be counted on. When we first entered, we saw the bodies, about 36. I just read where 36 has a meaning to the Jewish peoples, 36 Righteous will always be available or something: I just read that. And I also remember them switching this just a bit, while I'm on numbers, that it was on Easter Sunday, which was the fourth day of Passover, that the orders were given to the Armored Forces, which we were the screening, part of the screening portion when the attacks were ordered to go to Ohrdruf, and then, and on the seventh day of Passover, the last day of Passover, deliverance came to the three and then six we found later, Jews and two and one, and that two, a total of two, Russians and Poles. When we got there we saw the 36 bodies. We were angry. We could smell; we saw the pits where these bodies were burned. We saw the house where they would throw lye on the bodies to cut down the smell. It seemed so unnecessary. We didn't really know what we, we felt more or less that we were violating a trust. We weren't supposed to be in this, this hell. It was just way beyond us. And that's about all we can say, as Beesen, Sergeant Beesen said, a Texan, uneducated, according to what we consider education, and he said, we were standing there as people, the orders came to go out into

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the woods and fight the SS who were still there. And so we turned around and we went there. And that's about all we remember excepting that terrible feeling of anger which you yourself have experienced. But we, because it was something we could never ever have thought we would ever--we'd come, become in contact with, even in battle.

PS: I believe you answered this, Jack, but your estimate of how many prisoners were living when you entered the camp?

JC: Yes, my estimate is, should be correct. One of our men said one. I know, because I have pictures of four, and then I know there were four more because Leo Laufer--who we now know, he lives in Dallas, Texas--he's working very diligently in, on the Russian refuseniks and on B'nai B'rith down there, he's been up here very many times--have told us about him and his three companions. And this has been verified by the Center for Holocaust Studies and many other places. So...

PS: So...

JC: There were eight.

PS: There were only eight.

JC: Yeah.

PS: Would their, their physical condition was, would you say, close to death? Or...

JC: The, Leo Laufer saw him, because he had gotten away, he and the other three, and they were in a dug out some place or other, or a bomb shelter. And they saw a death march leaving Ohrdruf before we came in. And that death march apparently we found out about it, not that it was a death march, but a column of Nazis were moving out in the right flank, and some of us along with the 86th, 89th Infantry Division people went after them and fought. But Leo says that the prisoners were all killed on that forced march. The people we saw were in the hospital and they were near death. They would have died within two or three days if they hadn't been murdered, or exterminated, I'm sorry.

PS: [tape off then on] The few that were living when you entered the camp, do you know if they survived or if they were so close to death that they did not survive?

JC: Not really. We, I've been in Israel now three times, but twice at the invitation of the government. By that I'm not talking about just Jack Coulston, but I was invited to attend the World Assembly of Jewish Ghetto and Resistance Fighters, as a Liberator, and my wife Annie and I were invited to the World Assembly to commemorate the end of World War II, in 1945. And we did ask the computer in Israel, and we've been searching here, through the Center and other places, for other survivors of Ohrdruf, and there's been only one that we've found, and he says there's one other younger man in New York City, who he can get in contact with, but as far as I'm concerned there's only one, and that's Leo Laufer, because we have not seen the other. But the, these computer peoples have not found any.

PS: Do you know if this particular camp was set up for Jews only, or was it a mixed camp?

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JC: According to the historical documents, and according to a chap named Frei, I think it is, a book on the concentration camps; it was a worker death camp just for men. And I haven't the slightest idea if it was just set up for Jews, but the vast majority were Jews in there that we can tell. And there were a few Poles, or Russians there too. That's all I can say about that. Because that comes from later information, and the stories that I remember.

PS: With so few prisoners who were still living when you entered, is there any way that you can give a description of how they reacted to the United States soldiers entering, which meant to them, you know, the, probably a liberation that they never thought they would live to see.

JC: I can't say, but I just must repeat with Sol Tannenbaum, the, our rifleman, who'd been on the right flank chasing of the column of SS and prisoners, and brought back to talk to these four peoples who were still alive. And because he knew Yiddish and they knew it. of course. And, he said that he had to work on them to talk to him, for about, quite a while, to get his voice in Yiddish, to penetrate a dullness, or a terrible dullness of the mind that must have come through their sufferings. They had all been in the hospital anyway, and whatever a hospital could be called in such a place, where you were expected to die anyway. But he said they went from frantic animals, afraid, afraid of even his smell, until finally Yiddish got into--that universal language of the Jews--got through them, in their brain. And then, he saw some sort of satisfaction, and that animal look in their eyes seemed to change. And that's all I can say.

PS: Were you and any of the others in your outfit prepared with anything to help these people, such as food or medical supplies?

JC: No, and then I have to rely on memory. It must have been at some of the other camps, because we, as you, were--had to move readily, and we could never really stay any place. The peoples behind us did that type of work. But, eventually we were warned never, not to do anything for them, because [unclear] in food, and Leo Laufer said that somebody, some poor chap gave him a bottle of wine, and a lot of food, and he says--not a lot of food, candy bars--and he said he's never been sicker in his life. And I can believe it. Well, I know that's true. That can kill.

PS: Oh, many of the reports we've had were that many were killed by the well-meaning American soldiers who gave them their can of C rations and I guess there was so little left of their digestive systems that it killed them.

JC: I do have something on that. We had a doctor, Peleteri [phonetic], a fine man, an Italian with that type of romantic nature, but a good doctor. And just after the war at Round's Lookout, you might be familiar where that is--it's [now] in East Germany too--there was an SS hospital where the experimentations were on the stomachs of men. They would allow, or, men and women, mainly Jews, and they were trying to find out how much of a stomach could grow together before it would be impossible to bring that man back into physical well-being, by forced feeding later. And he and some German surgeons and other

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volunteers of the American Medical Departments were working up there to try to help these peoples who had been in this. We moved back too early to find out the results, but the Germans had experimented, the SS had experimented, on human beings, that dreadful thing of starvation.

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

JC: I can't even answer that. I, we were bitter. We had hatred. What we saw, my letters show that I saw a difference between the SS and the *Wehrmacht*. I know that I'm saying this with tongue in cheek, that possibly more were killed rather than wounded, immediately after that, and then we became human beings again. But that's about all I can say.

PS: About how long did you remain in the camp after, well, after you first entered? About how long a period did you spend there?

JC: 24 to 36 hours at most. And then other units came in to take over.

PS: Were you aware at this time that this was only one of many, many concentration camps?

JC: No. No, no we didn't. We found--and Joe Brown who I talked about and who I taught, was a platoon leader of our engineering platoon. And he and a sergeant blew the safe, the SS safe at the camp, under orders from Corps and brought American money and all their records back to Corps. But I really don't remember which Corps it was even, the 12th or the 3rd.

PS: Would you say that your experience has lingered after you left the camp?

JC: Yes, but it's hard to distinguish between, I guess we've all been asked that question, between that and the war. You know yourself that as you go down into a wooded area sometimes you start looking to find out whether you can go over the ridge. And here it's 45 years later. Also, sometimes smell can get you, and in the camps. And, yes it has affected us all I think.

PS: Jack, in your own mind can you explain the German decisions that led to the setting up of the concentration camps?

JC: No. No. I guess the only thing I can say is, no. It's impossible for an American, and I think most Americans, regardless of education, to understand.

PS: Considering the number of deaths that you later, were later uncovered, has this experience had any effect at all on your faith in humanity in general, your faith in religion?

JC: No, no, it hasn't. Because I feel that there is God. I haven't allowed myself to wonder how these things happened, excepting as Leo Laufer said, that these were acts of man instead of God. And that man is a, can be horrible. We all can, when we think of our own past. We have done things that we're ashamed of--nothing like that but. No, no, I, it's never affected me for some reason. [tape off then on]

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PS: Jack, after you left the camp, was there any official or unofficial meeting of your unit to discuss what you had experienced at the camp?

JC: No, no.

PS: Do you know if there was any regimental history that included this experience?

JC: There was none. We just had a separate battalion. I do know that the Infantry Division, 89th Infantry Division, did. And incidentally I have it and it could be copied. I, you, if I get it back tomorrow. Their 89th, I guess it's the first divisional record of a concentration camp. And perhaps you should have it here. It's a [unclear] copy, you know, the blue, yellow, blue, something. But I forget what they call it, but it does tell about the camp and what they were doing to those peoples.

PS: Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of camps?

JC: No, funny. No, not until 1979, 1980.

PS: Did you at any time prior to, oh, some time after the end of the war when facts and figures came out, did you have any conception whatsoever of the number of camps or the number of prisoners in captivity?

JC: No, none whatsoever.

PS: When did you first hear of the gassing of Jews?

JC: I don't remember. About, I can't remember on that, those specific points back since 1979. It was a strange thing. For instance, a--I had tried to mention our own camp, Ohrdruf, quite a number of times amongst both Jews and Gentiles. Jews told me to pay attention to my own affairs, that it was not a Christian or a Gentile problem. Gentiles and Christians, others who weren't there, would say, "That's a war story. Forget it. The war's been over so many years." And so, it was difficult. The only people we could talk to were our own peoples, who were, had been in our battalion.

PS: Jack, how long did you remain in Europe after the war?

JC: Six months.

PS: Do you think you would have had the same feelings if you had not been an eyewitness to the Nazi atrocities of the Holocaust?

JC: I doubt it, because I--it's impossible, and that's something that we must understand in our teachings; it's impossible to, for Americans, mixed bloods that we have as the Europeans call us, to understand such horrors. We've got to remember of course, because of other certain peoples' attempts at our freedom and that type of thing. But I know, even from letters that I've read of nurses and other guys, other men, we can't imagine such a thing if we're just an American who's lived here all our lives.

PS: Jack, I as the interviewer, and having had prior conversations with you and having read some of the manuscripts you have that you have written, and you have in your own memorabilia, can you tell us your involvements since the, since you returned from the war, how you became involved, and what your involvements have been?

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JC: Yes, I'll try to. Actually it started before the war, because of my industry and because of other things that seemed to have happened for some reason or other. For instance around 1937--and I just talked about this in Montclair, New Jersey, where I was raised, at a church, an Episcopal Church, St. John's. They asked me to talk about my relationships with the Jewish community in the, in Morris County. And I started by talking about part of our crowd, when we were only 17, 16 years of age, and a girl, a fiery cross, it was lit on a girl in our crowd's front lawn. She was about 16. She went to Kimberly. It was a prep school, a private school there. And she was Jewish. And how shocked we were. And that was in 1937 or so. The Ku Klux Klan did it. And then in '39 I had joined the National Guard, horse cavalry, private. And one of my customers was a German--a German Jew, but a German--at that time. And he had his Iron Cross over his office, and he was very German with his hair and stuff, and, but the other paint manufacturers who had accents were Polish Jews and Russian Jews in the paint industry in New York and New Jersey, predominantly Jewish. And the raw material suppliers like us were predominantly Gentile. And he started telling us something that was happening in Europe, and in Germany. And I would ask this man, and he would say, "They will never, Hitler, that little corporal, would never, never affect my peoples. We are aristocrats." And he had been a captain in one of the most prestigious of the Kaiser's cavalry regiments. And one day, just before my regiment was called out, I called on him and the secretary wouldn't let me see him at first. And then finally she did. And I saw a broken man. I saw a broken, Jewish man, not a German, not a German Jew. They had arrested his family. And he's the first of the victims of Hitler I'd ever seen, and it certainly taught me a lesson I never forgot. And that was in 1939 just before we were called out. I just wondered--[tape off then on] But then, as you know, once you got into the army, I thought at least that things seemed to change. It really didn't matter, I really can't tell who was a Jew or a Gentile or whatever in my own regiment, in my own company, in my own platoon, when I was a corporal and a sergeant. And it went on that way until the end of the war. Other peoples have told me that we had anti-Judaic, antisemitic behaviors. And I suppose we did, but I never felt conscious of it. I had friends and we had people above us and that was that. So, I guess it was, after the war when we started thinking of Ohrdruf, that this thing started. Now, right now, what we are doing, my wife and I, I'm co-chair of the Speaker's Bureau of the Holocaust Memorial Committee of Morris-Sussex area, the YNYWAJ, Northwest. It's part of Metro-West, New Jersey. I've been on the committee of the Liberation Statue at Liberty Park, New Jersey, Nathan Rappaport's famous statue. I'm on the Interfaith, not the Interfaith, the Jewish-Christian Task Force of the Diocese of Newark, Episcopalian. I [chuckling] I've forgotten. But there are about five or six more of those things. And, oh, I'm on a, the local Metro-West CRC, Interfaith Committee. I'm the co-chair of that with a girl named Sue Rosenthal. And I'm sorry I can't remember [unclear].

PS: Well, one of the things Jack just possibly an hour or two ago, right here at Gratz College, you spoke to a group of high school youth, and made certainly a very

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impressive, yeah, presentation to them on again very personal experiences and the horrible, horrible atrocities that you yourself were eyewitness to. So certainly, you know, that has been one of your very major contributions. [tape off then on]

JC: Now Sol Tannenbaum was a very special person to me. I suppose as we have been talking, and you know it's true, regardless of the fact that certain peoples have no real connection with your job or with you in an organization as large as a battalion, there are certain people that you have an affinity for. And I suppose I had an affinity for about five or six of our enlisted men. And I don't mean to say that I was a prig, because I had been an enlisted man too, but there was no reason, I never really met them that way, I don't think. But, we did. And Sol was one of them. And I had known him during training. He had, he told me that he had driven me, been my driver for a while, back in 1942 or '43. And of course when he was wounded that time, I had stopped his jeep and asked him why he was going up back to the front. He had been wounded two or three times. And that's when of course he told me that he had to fight for his country and for his Jewishness. And I--he was so proud of his being Jewish and so proud of being an American. Because his father had emigrated from Poland or Russia and had told him about life in those days with the pogroms. And so when finally because of the liberators' program and the liberators' conference in Washington, I was asked to talk at a Jewish temple, a Jewish temple, I'm sorry, a temple, at Yom HaShoah, I was panicked. And I called him up. And I said, "Sol, please help me. Please come with me." So Sol came with me, and we appeared, and he talked first, and he told about our experiences going into Ohrdruf and then I followed him. And the survivors, the beautiful thing was the survivors knew immediately that we had actually been there, and they crowded around us. They were the first ones to crowd around us, because they knew we had been there from the words that we had spoken. And so Sol and I have been close, well, ever since, until he died. And, before then. And he has spoken, I had to push him because he was not, he, not aggressive in that way. But he has spoken throughout Bergen County any place that he could. And then of course he died. The morning he died I wrote that eulogy for him and very unfortunately, there were very few people at his funeral. And just his family, not even his bosses. But there were four of us. And, the family were amazed because he had never, never told them anything about his past in the military.

PS: Jack, you know you have given us such wonderful testimony, such meaningful testimony that I very, feel very foolish asking you if there's anything you would like to add. But is there possibly anything additional you would like to add to your testimony?

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Tape one, side two:

PS: We are continuing the interview with John B. Coulston, Jack, again please?

JC: Yes, there are some things I'd love to say. Number one, of course it's so important our stories are told, any place, any place that there has to be told. Because we've got to sort of flood the market with the truth so that 100 years from now, people will, who will be able to find out that there was a Jack Coulston or a Phil Solomon who lived back in our days. We have our numbers, we had, we can be traced. Our stories must be told, and the survivor stories must be told, because as an example what can happen, I used to show, I showed my dog tags to a fine, really a fine German just after the war. I had taken over his home. He was an executive. He was an engineer, a ceramic engineer who had a ceramics factory. He had studied pre-med, because his father was a doctor in some of the finest univers-, and he attended the finest universities in England, France, and Germany. He had decided to become an engineer, transferred, during the First War. He was not a Nazi according to the, according to legal decisions of our own military government, because he didn't join the Party until late 1939, at a time when if he hadn't he would have lost his business. So he was apolitical. However, when he saw my dog tags, and he looked at them, and he saw on the right I think it was, he saw a "P" he said, "What's that?" And I said, "Protestant." He said, "Mmm hmm, I am Catholic." I said, "Fine." And then he saw the "A" and he said, "What's that?" I said, "That's my blood tag." And he said, "Aw, yeah, just like with us." He said, "A, Aryan." And I said, "Oh, no, no, no, that's my blood type!" He said, "Ya, ya, you have that so that the blood of a sub-human will not be given to you if you are wounded." I said, "No! No! No! That's blood. Blood has nothing to do with being an Aryan." And those days I called blue [unclear] because I suppose our own brainwash. But I--Aryan, if you look it up in the dictionary you don't want to, I mean, I can't even say that, but they're not us. They come from Iran. But, then he looked at my gun. And he knew I wasn't gonna shoot him, but the only thing was that he understand again that we were conquerors, we had conquered them. And he says, "Ya, ya, I know. That is right. Oh, that is not. That is not Aryan blood." But the one thought that got me was he had been brainwashed for so many years that could he really believe me after Hitler had had his mind for ten or fifteen years? But then the other thing that scared me, many years later, the *American Heritage*, I have copies of it, *American Heritage* wrote an article about military medicine, and the great discoveries of each of the wars that we have been in since the Revolutionary War. And one of them, one of the greatest discoveries that helped our war effort in World War II was blood plasma. It was invented by a black, the greatest marketing man who organized the Red Cross and it, and were able to get the blood from the peoples in America and then make it into plasma and then get it over to the troops where it was very, very badly needed for trauma, for the wounded, for all these peoples. And in 1944 when we really needed that blood, Army told, the Army told, ordered the Red Cross to segregate blood. And of course the Negro who was in charge of the organization doing that

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acted quick, because he just couldn't stomach it. So therefore, we, even back in those days, had some sort of a feeling that--and I do remember some men, some southern men, unfortunately uneducated, who would come to me and say, "If I am capti-, if I am wounded, please don't let me have the Negro blood. [unclear] my children will be black." And, and oh what could I say? But that's the other point, that our message has to get through. Our peoples must be educated not only against dictatorship, but our peoples, our kids, our children, should be taught to vote, to vote intelligently, to know that peoples, to vote even if they are a minority party. By that I mean that in our area sometimes, most people won't vote on either the Democratic or the Republican side, because there's no use to. But, certain parties--I consider it dangerous--can put their own peoples in, and then have them voted for nominations even though those people will never be elected. But, the party must use those peoples who have been nominated on their program platforms. Of course, I'm thinking of what's his name, some of these dangerous peoples like the Ku Klux Klan, and those peoples. And our children must be taught to vote. Because if we don't, our educational standards, the Board of Education, peoples like that, will not instruct them well enough. And we will have these poor people who will think that Aryan blood is a blood type, that all blacks have certain types of blood and can hurt in intermixing. And then, yes, yes, that is our mission and that's the one thing that I [unclear].

PS: Jack, I want to thank you very, very much for your most valuable testimony and also on behalf of Gratz College, to let you know how much we here at the Holocaust department appreciate all the work you have been doing to honor and to perpetuate the millions of victims of the Holocaust. Thank you very, very much. Again, this was John B. Coulston interviewed by Phil Solomon, on April 22nd, 1988. Thank you very much.

JC: Thank you.

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