

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

RICHARD CRANE

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon  
Date: December 1, 1994

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*RICHARD CRANE [I-I-1]*

RC - Richard Crane [interviewee]  
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]  
Date: December 1, 1994

*Tape one, side one:*

PS: This is Philip Solomon interviewing Mr. Richard Crane for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Mr. Crane served in the United States Army during World War II and was involved in concentration camp liberation. The date of our interview is December 1st, 1994. Mr. Crane, where in Europe and in what unit were you serving?

RC: Well, I was assigned to the 63rd Division Headquarters in the military government. Let's see, that's G-, I think we called it G-5 if I remember correctly, a section of the Division Headquarters. And from there I was sent down to be attached to one of the regimental combat teams of the 63rd Division as the military government officer with that combat team. And as the combat team fought forward, I was to try to establish some semblance of government for the people, to ensure that, do you want me to go on with this?

PS: Yeah. Well, at what point did the 63rd Infantry enter Europe?

RC: You mean when did I come down from the Division into...

PS: Well, no. When did you and the 63rd Infantry Division, say, land on the continent of, on the beaches in France?

RC: I didn't land with the 63rd.

PS: Yeah, oh.

RC: The 63rd landed not at Normandy. They came up from the southern...

PS: Oh, the 7th Army.

RC: 7th, yeah.

PS: From around...

RC: Right.

PS: Toulon.

RC: Right, exactly.

PS: The Mediterranean.

RC: Yeah. They came up, you know, to Grenoble.

PS: Yeah, I see.

RC: And then swung into line. And it was some time after they had swung into line along eastern France that I was assigned...

PS: To the...

RC: To the 63rd Division Headquarters from the 7th Army Headquarters.

PS: Yeah, right. In, when you were in France, before entering Germany, and after entering western Germany, did you see any evidence of Nazi atrocities against military personnel? Against civilians?

RC: I never saw any evidence of atrocities against military personnel at all. But...

*RICHARD CRANE [1-1-2]*

PS: Before, oh, I'm sorry.

RC: But I did see people who were obviously civilians.

PS: Yeah.

RC: And quickly realized that these were people who--they were not Germans, they were all foreigners from the viewpoint of German--who had been held by the Germans in one measure or another. And I quickly began to realize that they were probably...

PS: Yeah.

RC: Had been concentration camp inmates.

PS: Yeah, or at least...

RC: Whether they'd escaped or something like that.

PS: Or at least displaced persons or...

RC: Yes, right.

PS: PW camps.

RC: Right.

PS: Do you recall very much about their physical condition? Mental condition?

RC: Well, mostly I don't think I ever had an opportunity to learn of their mental condition. But mostly those that I observed in these circumstances to which we just [beeping; tape off then on]

PS: Richard, after the, this period of time in France, and then entering Germany, were you aware at that time of the, what later became known as the Holocaust? About the horrible unbelievable atrocities that were taking place within Germany? Were you aware at that time?

RC: Well, [pause] first of all, you know, I'm Jewish. And as a Jew, I was keenly sensitive to any aspects such as that. And I have a very strong memory, even from the time when I was a civilian, that certain things were going on in Germany which were, to say the least, unsavory. And probably that's too kind a word. With regard to full knowledge of concentration camps, I cannot speak with definitive memory at this point, fifty years later, whether I was aware. But if I wasn't aware before, I was very quickly aware of the existence of concentration camps. We spoke a moment ago, or you asked me the question was I aware of the physical condition of people, physical and mental condition of people I had seen on the roads. Well I was fully aware that the Germans were pulling back deeper into Germany. In the face of the American advances they were pulling back many of the concentration camp--for want of a better word--inmates. And they were on forced marches, deeper into Germany, so as not to leave them behind to be taken over by the Americans. And I knew that there were people who escaped at those times from those forced marches. And I was well aware that they were under the worst conditions. And you could see some of them in their striped suits with which we are so familiar now to identify them as concentration camp inmates.

PS: Before reaching the concentration camp where you were involved in liberation were you involved in, and witness liberation of any prisoner of, POW camps?

RC: No.

PS: Or displaced persons?

RC: Well, displaced persons...

PS: They were all over the...

RC: There was, they were all over...

PS: All over the roads.

RC: They were always moving around.

PS: Yeah.

RC: There were always, virtually always civilians in our midst.

PS: And they were just walking, walking, walking.

RC: Except, walking, that's right. And begging their belongings.

PS: Where they were going, yeah...

RC: You saw them with carts, pulling them along...

PS: Right.

RC: With mattresses they...

PS: Yeah.

RC: Hauled over their heads and carried.

PS: And probably they didn't even know where they were walking.

RC: No, I'm sure not. But they were omnipresent. They were everywhere. And we were always running into them.

PS: Now, leading up to your first experience, the liberation of a concentration camp, what is the, which concentration camp were you involved in?

RC: Well, we were working, I had this worked out in my mind and I forgot to as I said, we were working from a point, from the city of Heidelberg. Now Heidelberg, which I went into with the 63rd Division, Heidelberg had not been defended by the Germans. There were a number of German military hospitals there, wounded soldiers and so on. All the Germans had done was to blow up the bridges. And the Division engineers built the pontoon bridges and we crossed over. And from that point in Heidelberg, or at Heidelberg, we were working all the time south and east, heading toward Munich. That seemed to be our principal city destination.

PS: Now the time frame that we're speaking of is...

RC: Well, is April, maybe the early part or the very beginning. See, even before Heidelberg might have been in March.

PS: Yeah, of 19-...

RC: Of 1945.

PS: Right.

RC: And then of course the weather, incidentally the winter, that winter into 1945 was terribly severe.

PS: The worst, one of the worst experiences...

RC: Oh yeah. I remember, and we had frozen feet and so on.

*RICHARD CRANE [1-1-4]*

PS: Yeah. Never took our clothes, never took our boots off or...

RC: Yeah, right.

PS: Now, Mr. Crane would you like to lead up to your concentration camp liberation? What is the name? Which concentration camp were you involved in?

RC: Well, as we worked south and east, as I've just said, we were pointing toward Munich. Some distance from Munich of approximately, I have to guess at it, about 50, 60 miles, something of, like that, west of Munich...

PS: Exactly.

RC: Is that your knowledge?

PS: Yes, that is it.

RC: Yes, right.

PS: Yeah.

RC: There is the town of, in German, Landsberg, L-A-N-D-S-B-E-R-G, or in our speech pattern, Landsberg. Landsberg was a small city. Incidentally, that was the city in which Adolf Hitler after his failed *Putsch* of 1924, I believe it was, he was jailed there and it was, and that was a permanent jail of course of the Germans.

PS: Yeah.

RC: He, it was there that in, while incarcerated there that he wrote *Mein Kampf*.

PS: *Mein Kampf*.

RC: Right.

PS: Yes.

RC: Well at any rate, we were approaching Munich, and we encountered this town. You know, the details are very sketchy in my mind. I was not involved in any of the fighting to move into that area of Landsberg. But I remember hearing that they were breaking into a concentration camp and the conditions were terrible. And I immediately, as a military government officer I was very flexible. I could move around much more than the average infantrymen. Wherever my interests led, and wherever I felt that I had to go to be able to establish this military government, I went. So of course I had, I was at liberty to move in and I moved over to the concentration camp and I came into the camp. And it was just mind boggling. Do you want me to go on with a description?

PS: Oh yes, please, please.

RC: There were bodies, dead bodies, lying around. All of the, and I use the term inmates. What's the term that we use for these people? I don't know.

PS: I guess, yeah, inmates, prisoners.

RC: Prisoners. All of the prisoners, all of the concentration camp prisoners were dressed in the striped uniforms with which today we are fifty years later we are so familiar. And they looked just terrible. They barely looked human. They had shaved heads. They looked sickly. They were obviously weak. They were scabrous in some of the individuals. I remember that some of them came up and wanted to kiss your hand as a liberator. [tape off then on]

PS: Oh.

RC: And I must confess that I had a little tendency to draw back. You know, I was afraid that I sort of didn't want to catch a disease or, because they looked, but I was very moved by it. And all of the soldiers, all of the GIs that were there in the camp with me and, you know, around me, they were all equally struck. And I, the guards, the German guards, or some of the German guards, were still there. And they were being used to clean up things. And they understood very well on what a narrow line they had to walk. Because, I remember one of the sergeants objected to something that one of the German guards said or did, and he just took off after him and he hit him so hard. Because everybody's emotions were on the surface.

PS: Do you think there was very much violence when the inmates, or the prisoners, realized that they had control, do you think there was very much violence against the guards who were still...

RC: Yes, I...

PS: On the grounds?

RC: I think there were some instances, because I remember hearing of one or two of the guards being killed. They probably singled out the worst of the guards, and as soon as they realized that they no longer were under the control of the guards, they went after them. Of course some of the guards had escaped.

PS: Had fled, yeah, sure.

RC: Fled, as you know. There was no full complement of guards.

PS: Now, this was Landsberg Prison Camp.

RC: Right.

PS: Do you have any idea whatsoever of the number of living? The number of dead that you observed there at Landsberg concentration camp?

RC: Well the dead on the ground, I have a feeling they were in the dozens, at least. I know noth-, I really have no idea of what the population of that particular camp was. I remember one thing. I remember there were barracks there that instead of being built on foundations from the ground up had been dug into the ground almost like a bomb shelter. And there were no windows. And there was very little ventilation. You had to walk down a set of wooden stairs to get down into the barracks. And the odor that assailed you when you got in there was just overwhelming. It was sickening. You virtually gagged. And that's what these poor people had to live, you know, their conditions were just unimaginable.

PS: Were you able to communicate with any of the prisoners, verbally that is?

RC: A little bit.

PS: Could any of them speak English? Or could you speak German?

RC: No, I don't remember any of them being able to speak English. Yes, I spoke German and there was some small amount of communication. And as I say, as a Jew, I was very sensitive to the entire thing because I realized that these were fellow Jews. And maybe they were...

*RICHARD CRANE [1-1-6]*

PS: Do you believe that most of the prisoners were Jewish?

RC: Oh, I believe so, yes. I really do. You know, one can't be absolutely certain of that, but I just felt that most of them were.

PS: Did you see the...

RC: And there but for the grace of God...

PS: Yeah.

RC: When I looked at them, go I.

PS: Yeah.

RC: I was just fortunate for having been born in America, as opposed to them, who were born in Europe and therefore for them there was no escape, no...

PS: Did you see many, Richard, who were, oh, in very, very bad condition, say on the verge of death? And if so, was your unit equipped to feed and to treat these people?

RC: I, there were some few, obviously, that were on the verge of, were so weak that they probably, one could conclude that they were probably on the verge of death. And I remember some of our men gave them food, of course. But you know, they were incapable of ingesting that food.

PS: Yeah.

RC: The food was, they gave them chocolate. They gave them things like that.

PS: Yeah, I remember.

RC: And they were incapable of...

PS: Oh yeah.

RC: They got sick, because it was just too rich for them. Now, I understand after we moved on--and we were there a very short time--that a hospital moved in there.

PS: Now, I was just...

RC: And took over. And they of course administered to them. And those that were still strong enough were slowly brought back to some strength and...

PS: When you went in, was, did you have with you a medical unit that was capable of doing a little bit of something for them...

RC: Well we had...

PS: Medical?

RC: Corps men.

PS: Medical Aid men.

RC: Yeah, medical...

PS: Medical Corps men.

RC: Yeah, Medical Corps men. No, I don't, you know, the Regiment had attached to it of course...

PS: Yeah.

RC: A Regimental doctor and a, you know, the Regimental Aid Station and so on. I was there a relatively short time because we had to move on.

PS: Yeah.



*RICHARD CRANE [I-I-7]*

RC: You know? There were other things to do. It was more war to fight.

PS: Yeah. Your mission was not, was actually not liberation.

RC: No, of course only...

PS: The major mission.

RC: No, it was just in the course of events as we moved forward, that's what happened. And then we had to continue to move forward for fur-, into further enemy territory and to further combat.

PS: I just want to inject at this point, when I introduced our interviewee as Mr. Richard Crane, to do justice, Mr. Richard Crane at this time was Colonel Richard Crane.

RC: No, I wasn't. Not at that time.

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

RC: I was only a Captain, you know. I was just a Captain.

PS: Yeah.

RC: I eventually was promoted to Major sometime thereafter. And then when I was finally mustered out of the army, I was at, simultaneously with being mustered out, they promoted us to Lieutenant, promoted me to Lieutenant Colonel. And we went on to the Reserve.

PS: When you saw the, these prisoners at Landsberg, do you recall if there were any children?

RC: No, I don't...

PS: Were they...

RC: I have no memory of children.

PS: Were they mostly men? Or mixed men and women?

RC: I think they were all men. I...

PS: Yeah, I...

RC: Don't remember ever seeing women.

PS: Was just trying to think...

RC: I don't remember seeing women.

PS: Now, do you think that most of the prisoners were Jewish?

RC: Oh yeah. I have a strong feeling.

PS: Now what was the we've seen your reaction. Was the reaction of the non-Jewish men in your unit do you think that they felt very much as you felt?

RC: Well, I think perhaps I had an extra sensitivity as a Jew because as I said before, I sort of faced myself with the statement there but for the grace of God go you. But, believe me, all of the men there, Christian or whatever, felt equally moved by the circumstance, and equally angry and felt that the conditions were of the most indescribable kind.

PS: At that time, this was your first contact with the all but unbelievable atrocities of the Holocaust. Now at this time, did you in your wildest imagination believe that this is only one of hundreds of concentration camps? That the dead that you saw, which

was in the tens or even possibly hundreds would, the final count would be up to twelve million?

RC: Well, no. I had no way of knowing at that moment, you know.

PS: In no way could you relate this to...

RC: No.

PS: What later became known as the Holocaust?

RC: Yeah, we, I remember that later on in, while we were stationed in Germany there that we saw big posters that were released by army headquarters of hundreds and hundreds of these concentration people, piles, bodies piled and so I had an awareness later of the enormity and the magnitude of the thing. But at that time you used the figure, Phil, of...

PS: Twelve...

RC: Twelve million. Yeah, but what twelve million are you referring to?

PS: Well twelve million killed in concentration, killed in the Holocaust.

RC: Six million I thought.

PS: Well, six million Jews, and they figure...

RC: Oh, oh, yes.

PS: Yeah, that six million...

RC: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

PS: Which was comprised of...

RC: Right, right.

PS: Political prisoners, Gypsies...

RC: Right, right.

PS: Homosexuals...

RC: Right, yes, yes, yes...

PS: Poles, Russians...

RC: Yes, right, right.

PS: Who ended up, I think that twelve million is...

RC: Well I don't...

PS: Yeah, considering...

RC: No, I don't question that figure. I was just, you know, in my mind I have...

PS: Yeah, yes.

RC: The figure six million but of course I realize as you explained it there...

PS: Yeah, I believe it's...

RC: That that refers only to Jews, right.

PS: I believe they're figuring twelve million of...

RC: It's perfectly believable.

PS: Which six million were Jewish.

RC: Yeah, perfectly believable figure.

PS: And there's no way in the wildest imagination to think at the time that what you saw was only one of hundreds and hundreds.

RC: It was beyond imagining.

PS: In your own mind can you explain just what led the Germans to the setting up of concentration camps and the unbelievable cruelty of human beings against mankind?

RC: No, I've never been able to totally comprehend it, because I had known Germans. I had been in Germany before the war. I was in Germany in 1931 and '32 with my mother and my brother. And we had known Germans. We got to know Germans. We were in Munich. We lived outside of Munich for several months, and lived with a German family. So that I had some awareness of the German people and how, I have never been able to arrive at a point where I could comprehend or accept the enormity of their actions, and how people could commit themselves, individuals could commit themselves to be involved in these kinds of things.

PS: Unbelievable.

RC: It is unbelievable.

PS: Do you know if your unit, the 63rd Infantry Division, or any of the regiments, have a personal, a regimental history that mentions the Landsberg incident?

RC: No, I don't really know, Phil, because as I pointed out to you, I think I've learned that there is a division history of some kind. But I don't know what it states. And since I never was assigned to, but rather, or sent down attached to...

PS: Yeah.

RC: Which there's a difference, you know.

PS: Then you must...

RC: I'm using...

PS: Yeah, yeah.

RC: Army terms that you know very well.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

RC: Since I was never really an integral part of the 63rd Division, I never received any notices of meetings or of histories or whatever.

PS: Before you arrived at Landsberg, you did not know, before your regiment, or unit, arrived at Landsberg, they were not aware that there was a Landsberg concentration camp, right?

RC: No, no, absolutely not.

PS: They just stumbled on it?

RC: Yeah, well, as they moved forward they began to, you know, discover the thing. But I told you that we had had, because after all we had now worked into the end of March, or perhaps early April. And so we had spent some time in Germany...

PS: Yeah.

RC: Moving forward. And we knew that, because we were overrunning groups...

PS: Yeah.

RC: From time to time. We knew that there were individuals that had been placed in camps and subjected to the worst kinds of conditions.

PS: Right.

RC: We had an awareness of that.

PS: So you were actually at the site of Landsberg concentration camp for a very short time.

RC: That's right.

PS: Possibly a couple hours or a couple days?

RC: Well, I you know, I, first I thought it was a couple of days but I sort of on contemplation I only think it was one day at the most.

PS: Do you know anything about the treatment of the prisoners who were badly in need of help?

RC: What prisoners? I don't know...

PS: Oh, the concentration camp...

RC: Oh, oh, yeah...

PS: Survivors.

RC: Well, all I know is that it was my understanding that after we moved forward, hospital units...

PS: Yeah.

RC: Or a hospital, American hospital unit was moved in there to care for those people and nurse them where possible back to some reasonable state of health. You know, in an acceptable medical manner, not, you know, obviously, feeding them food that they were no longer capable of ingesting.

PS: Now, Richard, after you left Landsberg, did you have any other experiences with survivors, either incarcerated or walking? There were some of course who were in small camps who suddenly were free who just simply walked out. Did you have any contact with other prisoners, other survivors?

RC: No, I have no memorable awareness of having been involved with you know, other survivors or other people who had been subjected to these terrible conditions. Soon after Landsberg we, as we approached Munich, were outside of Munich, the division, it was my understanding that some of our, we had been in line for long enough so that some of our non-combat, what do you call them, casualties...

PS: Yeah.

RC: The non-casualties were beginning to approach in numbers the combat casualties. So I guess they figured that we had been long enough in line. They pulled the division out and we went into rest. And the other troops passed by us and went on into Munich and then on into Austria and, before you knew it, the war was over.

PS: Now when the war ended, you were in Austria?

RC: No, we were still in Germany.

PS: Oh.

*RICHARD CRANE [I-I-11]*

RC: And I'm trying to remember where we were. I can not remember...

PS: Oh, but do you...

RC: Exactly.

PS: Recall...

RC: We never went into Austria.

PS: Yeah. Do you recall how long you remained in Germany after the end of the war?

RC: Well I personally, once again, had something happen to me which was a little different from most people. We were sitting as I say in rest here in Germany. We were beginning to establish some limited relationships with the Germans in spite of the, after all the people were all around you. And one day I got a set of orders ordering me back to Paris, to go to attend a course at the Sorbonne, to attend a course in French civilization and language. And I had had some background as I said before, in French language, having been in Europe with my mother. So I left the division at that point and came back to Paris. And having been there before, and...

*Tape one, side two:*

PS: Phil Solomon interviewing Mr., or rather Colonel Richard Crane, at the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. We are on side two of tape one. Colonel Crane, you were just discussing your post-war experience after your Landsberg, which was just about I guess about ten days before the German surrender.

RC: Yes.

PS: Then you were telling us that you went to Paris.

RC: And I was sent back to Paris. I went to the Sorbonne for about four or five months. And although I had orders to join my division--the 63rd Division, which was en route to Le Havre, to be shipped back to the United States and then on to the Pacific for the continuation of the war--I suddenly got orders which put me on loan as an army officer to the State Department. And I was put, I was ordered to an outfit called The Office of Foreign Liquidation Commissioner, under the control of the State Department, for the liquidation of surplus army property in Europe.

PS: Oh.

RC: And that's what I continued to do for all of the next year.

PS: Oh. So this continued after the surrender of Japan in...

RC: Oh yes.

PS: In August of 1945.

RC: Right, right on through.

PS: Now, before you left Europe, did you witness the handling, managing or distribution of survivors and displaced persons, concentration camp survivors, displaced persons?

RC: No. No, for the short interval to which I related to you while I was still with the division in rest after, you know, after we pulled out of line, I did observe DPs, Displaced Persons. I never observed any, excuse me, any concentration camp inmates being handled. But I did observe Displaced Persons. But it was of such a short duration for me there, I really can't tell you anything too much about it.

PS: Do you think that you would have the same feeling--after all, you were certainly one of the major cogs in the chain of liberation--do you think you would have the same feeling today if you had not been an eye witness to the thousands of, to one of the very thousands of atrocities committed by the Nazis against humanity?

RC: Well...

PS: It's a long question, but...

RC: Well...

PS: It's...

RC: I like to feel as a sensitive human being I would have been equally moved and incredulous about my discoveries in the concentration camps. And I'm sure there are plenty other individuals who felt that way. It just was intensified, obviously by seeing with

my own eyes, and smelling, and having contact with these poor individuals. It so intensified it for me that I still, as I have told you, am very moved.

PS: Yeah. You know, Colonel Crane we have covered I think in depth your entire experience from beginning to the end and you certainly have added much to our Holocaust Oral History Archive at Gratz College. Is there anything that we didn't, any thoughts that you have that you would like to add to your testimony?

RC: I guess speaking like many other, speaking as a Jew, and speaking like many other people who are not Jews, I can only think in terms of the saying, "Never Again!"

PS: Yeah.

RC: And hope that things, such conditions never do arise again, although we're seeing conditions right now, are hearing of conditions right now in Bosnia-Herzegovina which give one to believe that perhaps some of the same conditions do, and have existed, or are existing now or have just a short time ago existed.

PS: And they have continued ever since the end of World War II, Ethiopia, Southeast Asia, Uganda, I think every corner of the earth has still had its share of atrocities and holocaust and genocide.

RC: Unfortunately, it would appear.

PS: Yeah.

RC: Man's inhumanity to man is a difficult thing to comprehend. And yet we have, must have an awareness it does occur.

PS: Richard, we thank you. On behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College we thank you very, very much. And certainly your testimony will become immediately a part of our oral history, which will be studied for many, many years to come. We thank you.

RC: Well it's been a great personal pleasure for me to be able to bear witness.

PS: And thank you very much.