

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ERNEST ECKSTEIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: November 4, 1987

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ERNEST ECKSTEIN [1-1-1]

EE - Ernest Eckstein [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: November 4, 1987

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Ernest Eckstein, November 4, 1987. Mr. Eckstein, 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?

EE: Well, I was in the 93rd Heavy Mortar Battalion, attached to any division that needed fire power. At that time we were in Weimar, Germany, which is only about 20 miles from Buchenwald.

PS: At that time did you know of the existence of this particular camp that you would liberate before you arrived there? If so, please tell what you knew, or had heard about it.

EE: Well, we didn't know exactly what Buchenwald was. In fact I never heard of Buchenwald till we got to the place and naturally we, the German people didn't know anything about it, as far as I know, they didn't know. But when we got to the camp, we went through the main gate, and that's, I have never seen anything like it in my life. What we saw, people we interviewed, they were all lined up outside. And while we were speaking to them, two of them perished right then and there.

PS: Before you arrived at the camp...

EE: Yes?

PS: Had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews in Europe? If so, please describe.

EE: Well, we heard, you know, that they, you know, that the Jews were massacred, but the thing it was, that the only camp that we ran into was the Russian camps, the Polish camps that we liberated, and they're the ones that told us exactly what happened.

PS: Were those camps concentration camps or POW?

EE: No, they were...

PS: Prisoner of war...

EE: Working camps.

PS: Oh, oh, labor...

EE: You know, they were, labor camps.

PS: All right. But this...

EE: Working camps.

PS: But this is Buchenwald...

EE: Yes.

PS: Was the first concentration camp.

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EE: Yes. And I understand there that most of the political prisoners were in Buchenwald.

PS: So you had heard something of the mass murder of Jews.

EE: Yes, I did, but I never realized that it, that something happened like this, in Buchenwald. I never, never seen anything like it.

PS: Will you please give the name of the camp, which you have identified as Buchenwald, its location, also the date if possible when you arrived at the camp site?

EE: Well, the dates are [chuckles] and we were pretty well, what should I say, you know, we were pretty well up and when we heard that the war might be over soon, and we didn't keep no dates on it. But I know it was the first week in April. [tape off then on]

PS: That would be 1945. [tape off then on] Early in May.

EE: Yeah.

PS: And this probably was...

EE: Yeah.

PS: About three or four weeks prior...

EE: Right, right.

PS: To the best of your memory, describe what you saw at the camp, and what you felt at that time.

EE: Well, you know, there was only about two, three Jewish people in our outfit, and we have never witnessed anything like it, and we were really, really, you know, upset what we saw there. We saw, as you can see in the pictures, we saw the bodies lined up over there, and the man that we interviewed, he told us that it wasn't only that he had to, you know, and they made him pick up the people. They made him pick the people up and put them in the chamber, you know.

PS: Eh...

EE: Whatever he, you know...

PS: This man was...

EE: This man, yeah.

PS: Actually one of the...

EE: One of the...

PS: Prisoners.

EE: Prisoners there, and they made him pick up. It wasn't the Germans, you know. They made the man pick up the people and now you, now can you imagine how he'd feel? How you can feel you know when they did that?

PS: Do you believe that he had no choice but to...

EE: Well he had no choice at all.

PS: Yeah.

EE: He had no choice. And we saw, of course you know, when we went in we still saw the bodies piled up over there. And then, right behind the bodies we saw on one pile was all clothing, and the next pile was shoes, and the next pile was gold teeth piled up,

you know. They pulled their teeth out, you know, and the gold, you know, and they saved the gold. They needed the gold. And they, even the hair, even the hair they cut off, you know, and they saved it.

PS: Were there, now I know that some concentration camps were set up as death camps, with gas...

EE: Oh yeah.

PS: And with the crematorium.

EE: Right.

PS: And of course Buchenwald...

EE: Yes, right.

PS: Did you see this in...

EE: Yes.

PS: Buchenwald?

EE: I saw the whole works over there.

PS: The gas chambers and...

EE: Gas chambers and everything else.

PS: Can you estimate how many prisoners there were, if any of them were dead--and you say that you saw...

EE: Well, we went through the barracks and each barrack, you know, you have these sliding beds over there. It wasn't a bed, it was like a shelf, about four or five rows high. And they put six people, you know, lined up. There was hardly any distance between the top shelf and the bottom shelf, right? And they, we, when we pulled the bodies out, the medics, you know, they saw some people dead already, you know. They were so weak from food that they couldn't live. Even the fellows that were lined up to be interviewed, I saw two people drop.

PS: Just while you...

EE: Cause they were so, just while we, while...

PS: Were...

EE: Yeah. And you couldn't give them anything to eat, because they, you know, the doctor says that it would kill them. They have to bring them, you know, bring them up slowly.

PS: Yeah, slowly and...

EE: Because, first they weighed 60 pounds, 65 pounds, as you can see in those pictures.

PS: The individual you mentioned...

EE: Yes.

PS: As the one who was forced to make a selection...

EE: Yes.

PS: For the gas chambers, wasn't there a name that was given to those individuals who were guards and also had the...

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EE: Well...

PS: Responsibility...

EE: Now we [chuckling] when we got to the camp there were no guards at all, you know.

PS: No, they had gone.

EE: They had all left, you know.

PS: Yeah.

EE: Although I, some of the infantry boys said there when they pulled in over there, right after us, they saw two, three of 'em and they just killed them. [tape off then on] Well, you know, he had to go and pick up, you know, they, you know, I saw the gas chamber. There were all finger marks, you know, from, you know, when they put them in there they didn't know what's gonna happen to 'em. They said they're gonna be loused, you know?

PS: Yeah, in the showers.

EE: Deloused, you know.

PS: Yeah.

EE: And everything else. But they must have really suffered, because you can see finger marks and everything else, you know. And it only took a few minutes, five to ten minutes, before you know they, before they were all dead.

PS: Can you, do you recall if you or your unit were able to save any of the prisoners who were close to death at the time of liberation?

EE: Well, the medics came in and they saved as many as they could, you know. But some of them were in such badly, you know, shape that they just couldn't save them, you know, couldn't save them at all.

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

EE: Well, that was a mixed camp. A lot of political prisoners there, a lot of political prisoners.

PS: Do you have any rati-, any idea of...

EE: Well, I would say about...

PS: Ratios...

EE: Seventy, thirty. [Means 70% and 30%]

PS: Seventy...

EE: Seventy Jews and...

PS: Yeah, and thirty...

EE: Thirty, yeah.

PS: If it was a mixed camp...

EE: Yes.

PS: Which you say it was...

EE: Yes.

PS: Do you know what nationality groups were there?

EE: Well there were, I know there was, we spoke to a man, you see I'm from Hungary, you know, I'm Hungarian, you know, so he spoke. So I can pick up a few, I, yeah, there was Hungarians there, Polish, dissidents, there were some Yugoslavian dissidents, even German dissidents were in there too.

PS: Were there any children? If so, were they kept together?

EE: Well, the children that we saw, they, I didn't see any babies let's say, up to about 10. But I saw many a fourteen, fifteen, sixteen-year-olds. And they were in fairly good shape because they used them as workers, you know. They used them, you know, and of course, a young body, you know, can take a little punishment.

PS: But the youngest you saw you think was...

EE: Yeah, about 14...

PS: About 14 or 15.

EE: Or 15, yes.

PS: Please...

EE: No babies.

PS: Describe the responsibilities if any that you had been assigned, in arranging for the transfer or care of the prisoners.

EE: Well the medics arranged, you know, to transfer the prisoners, you know. And then they, at that time we had left already, you know, and they took care of the prisoners and they transferred them to different hospitals, U.S. Army hospitals, the ones that were in pretty bad shape. The ones that could be saved they brought them along slowly, you know. In fact I forgot to mention to you when we walked through the barracks we had to wear a mask...

PS: Yeah.

EE: Because it was st-, it was really awful.

PS: The stench.

EE: The stench [unclear].

PS: Yeah, yeah, that's one word that...

EE: Oh, it's really undescrivable. It's, you can't, there isn't a day goes by that I don't think about it.

PS: Can you describe the reactions of the prisoners as you entered the camp? If there were any Germans or other guards still left when you came, please describe their behavior.

EE: Well, as I said before, there was no guards left when we went in there. They all left. And as far as the prisoners, they, some of them lined up to greet us. Some of them had to just lay on the ground because they couldn't stand. You know, they couldn't stand. And they were telling us the story that they went through, you know. And we had that interpreter like I said, you know. The Captain he spoke a little English, you know. So he was telling us exactly what it was.

ERNEST ECKSTEIN [1-1-6]

PS: You had just one interpreter?
EE: Just one.
PS: In other words...
EE: [unclear]
PS: There was no other communication verbally with the prisoners...
EE: Well, we talked to, we, I tell you the truth, you know, we, of course they were lined up so, I couldn't, I wanted to give them cigarettes and cigars, whatever I had, or anything. But you couldn't give 'em anything. And because there was so many of 'em I only had a pack of cigarettes with me. So I figured that you can't give one not the others, you know. But what I did is, I went to the commissary, you know, the mess sergeant, you know, and I finagled some tea, coffee, whatever I can do, and give it to them.
PS: How many, when you entered Buchenwald...
EE: Yeah.
PS: Roughly about how many were in your unit, liberators who entered...
EE: Well...
PS: When you...
EE: While we were there well we had the whole battalion went in.
PS: Oh, oh, yeah.
EE: The whole battalion went in, yeah.
PS: And there was no verbal communication except with...
EE: They couldn't speak.
PS: Yeah, I...
EE: They couldn't speak.
PS: Except with the interpreter.
EE: [unclear] except the interpreter.
PS: Yeah.
EE: They couldn't even talk. They were just, you know, they were holding their hands like this. They couldn't believe it's us. You know, and of course you know I found some Jewish prisoners, you know, and I pulled out the Army Bible that they issued us, you know, the Hebrew Bible?
PS: Yes, yes, I had it.
EE: And I gave it to one. He cried, you know. He cried. He couldn't believe that I'm a Jew.
PS: Yeah.
EE: You know.
PS: And in the Army...
EE: And in, that's right.
PS: Fighting.
EE: That's right.

PS: Did you come prepared with food and medical supplies? If so please describe the distribution of supplies.

EE: Well they, the medics took care of everything else, you know, I mean, they had all the supplies that they needed, you know. Of course other outfits came in and they had their own medics, you know. And so they took care of everybody.

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

EE: That's needless to say, you know, that I--it's just awful that I--just couldn't believe what I saw in my eyes. I couldn't see. I couldn't believe it, that one human being could be so, I don't know what to tell you. It's really a, I think about it every day. One more thing that I didn't tell you that, they had, in Buchenwald, you heard of Ilse Koch?¹

PS: Yes, yes.

EE: She was a, she was...

PS: Mmm hmm.

EE: She was one of the camp masters over there. She used to have these big dogs, these big, and she, and they took us where she lived. It's up on a, you know, they have, you know, these tower guards they have in prisons here?

PS: Yes.

EE: And they were up on. So we walked up the steps over there. They had living quarters over there, right? They had a lampshade made out of a human skull, lampshades. She had.

PS: In other words you would say that after seeing...

EE: Yeah.

PS: What you saw at Buchenwald...

EE: Yeah, yeah.

PS: That you really at that time knew what you were fighting for, and what you were fighting against...

EE: Oh yeah, that's right.

PS: Even more than...

EE: That's right.

PS: Prior to...

EE: Even more than before, you know.

PS: Yes. Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? Did you talk with them afterwards about what you had experienced?

EE: Well, they were, they had the same feelings as we did, because like, they never seen anything like it, and they had about the same feeling as we did, but us as Jews, you know, that was a different story all together.

¹Wife of Karl Otto Koch, commandant of Buchenwald August 1937-1941. He was appointed *SS Standartenführer* and Ilse Koch was appointed *SS Aufseherin* of Buchenwald as cited in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.

PS: At that time were you aware that this was only one of many concentration camps and death camps?

EE: That's the only one that I knew. I didn't know anything about the other camps.

PS: You didn't realize...

EE: I didn't realize...

PS: That there were...

EE: Till after the war was over, you know, how many camps they liberated. We were only interested, you know, in the 3rd Army. I was attached to the 3rd Army, you know, and that's the only thing. Now the rest of the camps were like I said, they was all labor camps. [tape off then on]

PS: After that experience of entering Buchenwald, did you talk with men in your outfit about the experience?

EE: Yes I did. And they said that they had never seen anything like it before. You know, only human eyes can watch and see what happened over there. There's no way that I can tell people, you know, back in America, right here, what happened. You have to see it for yourself.

PS: Please tell how long you remained in the camp, and whether your experience lingered after you left. Has it had any influence on your thinking as you look back?

EE: Well, we stayed there, we only stayed because different outfits were coming through, we stayed there two days, forty-eight hours. And then we left. Other units came in and you know, we left. We had to, we went back to Weimar, and then in the meantime the war was over. And I stayed there six weeks after the war and I was the second highest person in the battalion. I had enough points, 86 points, and I was discharged, and I was back in the States in July.

PS: Can you estimate, again, getting back to your entrance into Buchenwald...

EE: Yeah.

PS: Can you estimate, oh, approximately how many survivors were still living?

EE: Well there were 20,000 at least. That's what they, that's what the [unclear] told us at the time.

PS: Living?

EE: 20,000 dead, eh, living. So, you know, but of course you know they, you know, so many of them perished you know, and because they just couldn't bring them around, you know.

PS: In other words there...

EE: [unclear]

PS: Were approximately...

EE: Yeah. About 20,000.

PS: 20,000 who were alive when you entered.

EE: Yeah, yes.

PS: Of which many doubt-, undoubtedly...

EE: Many, many...

PS: Passed away.

EE: Many.

PS: In your own mind, how do you explain German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

EE: Well, heh, it's really [chuckling] hard to say, you know. I have never believed that anything like this could happen. And they set the camps up, as I told you before, we, I, we didn't know anything about Buchenwald or the other camps, you know, what happened there, until we got there. We heard about Jews being rounded up and so forth, but nothing like Buchenwald. Nothing like Buchenwald.

PS: After you left Buchenwald...

EE: Yes.

PS: Was there any official, or unofficial meeting of your unit to discuss what you had experienced at the camp? Do you know if there was a regimental history that included this experience?

EE: There was, there was a, when we were there, there was a Jewish chaplain came in the last day we were there and was, you know, I myself, you know, and a couple other Jewish boys were tellin' him exactly what happened. And he was telling us that they're going to, what they're gonna do is take a historic fact what happened in that camp. A lot of them did. In fact I know one, you know, the cantor from, the rabbi from New York. He was, he's a rabbi now in New York. But he was in camp that day.

PS: Prior to seeing Buchenwald...

EE: Yes.

PS: You had not heard anything whatsoever of the gassing of Jews and other...

EE: No, that I didn't hear. We didn't hear anything about that. The only thing we heard is that they're, they were rounding up Jews and they were putting them in camps and so forth.

PS: Would you care to add anything else to your testimony?

EE: Well, let's see, what I, I could tell you one thing is that a lot, that this experience is something that a person can never forget. And I wish that no one would go through what we went through that day. That's the only thing I could tell you.

PS: Just, incidentally, about how long did you remain in Europe after the war?

EE: After the war? Like I said, we were there, let's see, about April, let's see, the war ended about April, was it 14th or 15th, I'm not sure.

PS: The end of...

EE: The end, not the end of April. I think it was around the middle of April.

PS: The 9th of...

EE: The 9th of April?

ERNEST ECKSTEIN [1-1-10]

PS: The 9th of May was...

EE: Yeah, that's it.

PS: Victory, was the...

EE: In Europe, yeah.

PS: Official German surrender.

EE: Yeah, surrender that time. And as I said, our battalion, after we got through with Buchenwald, we were stationed, we went back to Weimar. Now my particular outfit was, we were going to get a 30-day furlough and go to Japan. But in the meantime, I had enough points to get out. And I was the second one in my battalion to leave. And, you know I had, my oldest son was a, he was born already in 1942 and I had enough points to leave. Because I was in the service, you know, from early January till September the 24th. You know, I was among the first thousand that left Philadelphia here.

PS: The first thousand!

EE: Yeah. And I tell ya...

PS: That was in what year, Mr. Eckstein?

EE: In '41.

PS: In '41.

EE: Yeah. '41 in January. Remember the first draft was...

PS: Yes.

EE: In October?

PS: I went in in...

EE: I went in the first draft.

PS: I went in the first of December, '41.

EE: '41? I was in, and then I came out the 24th of September. I was discharged at Fort Bradley.

PS: Just one more question...

EE: Yeah.

PS: Mr. Eckstein. You have expressed very strong feelings...

EE: Yeah.

PS: Naturally of...

EE: Yeah.

PS: Toward all that happened.

EE: Yeah.

PS: Do you think you would have had the same feelings...

EE: Yes.

PS: If you had not been an actual eyewitness to Buchenwald and other sites that you saw in...

EE: No, see, it, you have to be there yourself. There is no way a person over here in the States or no where else that had, didn't go through that, could never, never experience what we did.

ERNEST ECKSTEIN [1-1-11]

PS: Mr. Eckstein, I thank you very much for sharing with us your experiences as a liberator. Thank you very much.

EE: Thank you.