HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

LEONARD GOLDFINE

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: December 6, 1988

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LG - Leonard Goldfine [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
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Tape one, side one:

PS: Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Leonard Goldfine, for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is December 6, 1988. Can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of a concentration camp or installation, whatever it was?

LG: We, I was with the 3464th Medium Maintenance Company, which was assigned to do the battlefield maintenance for two Infantry Divisions and a armored division. We left England through Bournemouth, arrived in France up the Seine River, at Rouen, then moved up through Holland and Belgium. We crossed the Rhine River at Rheinberg, and into a first German area that we penetrated was a place called Mönchengladbach, which is in the Köln region, in the Rhine valley.

PS: The Rhine valley, not the Saar...

LG: The Rhine valley.

PS: Not the, yeah. In connection with the concentration camp, or whatever installation it was that you liberated, did you know of the existence of this particular place that you would liberate before you arrived there?

LG: No, we had, I had no inkling of any kind, of the fact that the Germans were using slave labor, or of any atrocities surrounding concentration camps, or any activity of that kind of any nature, before I arrived in Germany and started to see things with my own eyes.

PS: You never had, you never knew of the existence of the concentration camps, gas chambers, ovens...

LG: No. I was drafted into the army of May of 1941, and it seems that as a result of being in the army, when some of this information began to filter out, that as a soldier I was somewhat insulated from the general population, and the news was circulating through the general population.

PS: Did you suspect that there was a, if not the deaths on the scale that you saw and heard of later, did you suspect that there was a, many, many, possibly millions of people being displaced into slave labor camps there?

LG: Until I arrived in Germany I had no idea of that, of any kind. And the fact of the matter is, until, when we first ran into it, I had no inkling that it was a Jewish problem of any kind. But, it was my impression at first that it was something that was being done to general populations. It wasn't until after I had come back from the Elbe River, to Hannover, Germany, that I first began to understand the thrust. That the main thrust of these camps and atrocities were aimed at the Jews.

PS: Leonard, before arriving at the site of this enemy installation, did you see any evidence of German atrocities against...

LG: Yes.

PS: Civilians, or American soldiers, or prisoners of war, or displaced persons?

LG: Yes. We began to see evidence of this right after we crossed the Rhine River. The first inkling of these types of activities was at a place called Mönchengladbach, which is in the Rhine region, in the coal mining areas, when we began to run into groups of slave labor that had been used in the coal mines. And they began to tell us some of their stories of their work in the coal mines as slave labor. That was the first time we ran into slave labor. The atrocity at that time really was limited to making slaves of human beings. The people we ran into seemed to be fairly well-cared for, in that they were well-fed and strong, and healthy. We did not run into people who had been physically beaten or deteriorated. Just people who had been people, ordinary people who had been made slaves.

PS: Yeah. At that point, had you met or seen any Allied prisoners of war just liberated from German POW camps or...

LG: No.

PS: Displaced persons?

LG: No, we didn't run across any of our or any other country's soldiers who had been captured by the Germans. We did run into quite numerous instances of persons who had been enslaved and displaced by the Germans and used for slave labor.

PS: Did they give any evidence, physical evidence or mental evidence of having been the victims of a degree of atrocity short of murder?

LG: Yes, yes. Not in the area of Mönchengladbach in the Rhine valley. But after we crossed the Weser River and then again after I came back through Hannover, Germany, there was a great deal of evidence of the mistreatment and the physical abuse, the beating, and the murder of these slave laborers.

PS: Getting to the point where you first saw the true example of the Nazi atrocities, I'm referring to the camp or installation that you liberated. Can you give us the name of the camp and its location?

LG: Well, I'd like to back track and talk about some other places first.

PS: Yeah, sure.

LG: If I may.

PS: Fine.

LG: When we crossed the Weser River, it was at night and we were looking for a place. We had been on the road for quite a long time, and we were looking for a place to bed down for the night to rest our soldiers and to sort of regroup ourselves. And we ran into a factory. It was a factory that manufactured synthetic rubber. This place was run completely with slave labor. The factory was set up so that the foreman would be in barricaded pillboxes within the factory, so that the slave laborer would not be able to

attack them. Because they mistreated the laborer completely. They worked them to death until they died. They didn't feed them properly. They abused them by physical abuse. While we were there we had an interesting experience. The morning after we arrived, we were sitting in what was the executive office. A beautiful carriage with a horse that was one of the prettiest horses I've ever seen, pulled up outside with a man sitting, driving the horse. And out of the carriage came a handsome, tall, elderly man. When I say elderly, a man in his sixties, dressed impeccably. He came into the executive office to talk to us. We paid very little attention to him, but he finally made his presence known. And we happened to be sitting in his office. It turned out that this was a German who had ma-, emigrated to the United States and apparently had held some rather important positions in the United States. And when Germany started to prosper after the advent of Hitler, he went back to Germany and became the head of this synthetic rubber factory and worked under the Germans in this synthetic rubber factory, using slave labor that were completely abused. He spoke impeccable English, had been educated in the United States, and had gone back to Germany to join the Nazis, from the United States. At the end of our conversation, because we didn't spend too much sympathy on him, he made the remark, "Well, I guess I made a mistake in coming back to Germany." And he turned around and walked out.

PS: Can you identify nationalities of most of the people involved in the slave labor that would be...

LG: Yes, in a town called Letzlingen, we were the first American soldiers in that town. We, the, as we came into the town, the gutters along the road, the shoulders along the highway were full of people in striped suits who were emaciated, hungry, and so weak that they couldn't lift their arms even to eat. We had our job to do, which was to move ahead and take this town, and occupy this town. And we were not able really to stop and take care of these, although we did have the knowledge and the comfort of knowing that we were immediately followed by service groups, that were gathering up these people and taking them to hospitals and giving them the aid they needed. So, although we were the first soldiers to run across them, because of our mission we were not able to stop. We had to keep moving. But we did have the full knowledge that others behind us were following right on our heels and were taking care of these people. We moved into Letzlingen and we ran into a situation where we were in German hostile territory. We spent one rather serious night when we were surrounded by the Germans. Our communication lines had been cut, and the situation was that we had run into over 900 slave laborers. They were of different nationalities. They were a mixture of Russians, Poles, Romanians, Hungarians, Czechs, French. There was a tremendous amount of animosity between the different groups. We had to actually separate them from each other, to keep them from attacking each other physically. That was part of the problem that we had to solve in the middle of trying to fight a war! The, we appointed the German store, shop keepers in the area to be the arm to feed the German and the slave population

while we were there. We were there approximately four days. And this was the first time we really came head on to large populations of slave labor. At this particular place, the soldiers in the outfit came running to me one afternoon and said, "Lieutenant, we found a Jew!" This population was completely, the slave population was completely non-Jewish.

PS: I was just gonna ask you if there were any Jewish people among...

LG: They found one...

PS: Among this group.

LG: They found one Polish Jew among these 900 and some odd slaves.

PS: Were there any children among them?

LG: No. The youngest people, there were some 17, 18-year-old girls, who were used as servants in the inn and in the German homes. And a curious side effect, one young girl about 17 years old, had been a servant in the inn that we took over for our headquarters. And we warned her, I said, "Don't go outside. These guys out there are wild. They've just been set free." I said, "You're crazy to go outside. Stay here where it's safe." And her remark was, "You have never been a slave. You don't know what it means to be set free." She says, "I'm free to go!" And there was no restraining her. She went out and joined the mob, because it was the first time in her adult life apparently that she was free to do what she wanted.

PS: Was there any difficulty? Well, was there very much difficulty in communicating, that is, the language barriers?

LG: We had soldiers with us who could act as interpreters. We had soldiers in our outfit that spoke various languages. And we were able to get along. As far as the Polish Jew who was brought to me, I spoke to him in my halting Yiddish. But we managed to communicate, and I asked him what he wanted. And the only thing he asked for, he wanted some fresh eggs. So I took him out in the woods to a farm that happened to be nearby, and we knocked on the door and a German woman came to the door, and when she saw me standing there with, all covered with my guns and everything, she turned white. And I said to him, "Tell her what you want." And she ran like crazy, and she got him two dozen fresh eggs, and gave him the two dozen fresh eggs. And then I had to go on to my duty to take care of what the job that I really had to do.

PS: Then after these experiences, you eventually came to a camp that was more or less the focal point of your experience with the Nazi atrocities. Is that correct?

LG: Well, this was the bottom of the barrel. This was the place that really is unbelievable. You couldn't believe what you were looking at.

PS: Can you, do remember the, recall the name and...

LG: Yes.

PS: The approximate date?

LG: The place was called Gardelegen.[1] It was a few miles outside of this town called Letzlingen that I just described. The commanding General of the area, we were part of the 9th Army, the commanding General issued an order that every American soldier close enough to do it was ordered to go visit and see what the Germans had done. The atrocity actually, well, I shouldn't say the atrocity, you know, seeing people lying in a ditch, skeletons, really, I mean so weak that they couldn't even lift their arms to feed themselves, is an atrocity enough. But this atrocity happened within the 24 hours that we came into the area. Why, in desperation they killed 3500 people right before our arrival I'll never understand.

PS: There were 3500?

LG: There were over 3500 people that were reported to have been killed in this barn. It was the end of the line. They had their back up against the Elbe River. There was no place they could go. And they herded these people into a barn and set fire to them; physically set fire to them. And then used a bulldozer to empty out the barn and shovel these people, these corpses, into trenches that had been dug outside the barn. And then they'd bring in another load into the barn and burn them up. And that's the way they burned up over 3500 people. When we reached the area, we did get there in time, that some of the people who had been gathered there and were destined to be burned up were freed. I, myself, don't like to use the word liberator. Because we came there and we fought a war, and although we were responsible in freeing people from slave labor and from the atrocities, we didn't know what we were going to be doing. We didn't know what we were going on. To me a liberator is someone who takes his life in his hands and goes into some place to liberate somebody, knowing that he's liberated. We really set these people free by accident. We ran into these places by accident. We stumbled over them. We didn't know that we were coming, and when we got there we didn't really understand what it was we were really looking at and what we were really doing. We really freed these people as a result of an accident of fighting a war, and not that we moved into there with the purpose of liberating them.

PS: That was not your objective. In fact you were not even, as you say...

LG: We weren't even aware of it.

PS: You weren't even aware. Among the 3500, did you see any children?

LG: No. These were--when the, you know, the definition of children, my impression is that these were all young people, people over 20 years old.

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[1] Death marchers from the small labor camp of Rottleberode, a subcamp of Dora-Mittlebau, are driven to the outskirts of Gardelegen, Germany, which they had reached two days before. Then just over 1,000 prisoners are herded into a barn, which has been prepared as an execution site, by SS guards and members of the local militia. As the last prisoners are pushed into the barn, the SS guard throw torches onto the gasoline-soaked straw and lock the doors. Those prisoners who are not killed by the smoke and fire are shot by the SS as they try to escape. Only a few of the prisoners survive. On April 14, 1945, American troops reach Gardelegen and discover the charred corpses from the previous day's massacre of Jews. (*The Holocaust Chronicle;* Publications International, Ltd.; pp.604-605)

PS: Can you give any, oh, I know it's difficult, but do you think they were very many Jews among that group? Or...

LG: I had no way of knowing. I do know that there is one picture of a man who had just been burned up with his head on a stone, in the Yad Vashem. It's in the next, in Jerusalem, it's in the next to the last room before you leave the Yad Vashem. There's a picture of a man who had just been burned up, with his head on a stone. And I was there when that picture was taken. And I just assume that the, that a part of those who were burned, and that those who were laying in the ditches in the striped suits, must have been Jewish.

PS: I know it's asking a lot at this point. Can you, do you recall the spelling of the, these installations? The camp that...

LG: It wasn't an installation really. It was a farm area.

PS: Yeah.

LG: And a hunting area with woods all around, where the Germans used to go on vacation, to have a good time hunting deer, and hunting all kinds of wild animals. It wasn't an industrial area. And there was no real installation there. The use of this barn appeared to be used merely because it was the last place...

PS: Yeah.

LG: That they could find in which to commit this last atrocity...

PS: Oh.

LG: Before they were captured. The spelling of the town, as I recollect, is Gardelegin, G-A-R-D-E-L-E-G-I-N. [Gardelegen]

PS: Also, can you recall the approximate date that this occurred?

LG: This was about three or four weeks before VE Day.

PS: Which would have been around April 15th.

LG: '45.

PS: Thereabouts. Yeah, forty, 1945.

LG: Okay.

PS: You estimated that there were approximately 3500.

LG: That's the figure that the, was given to me, to all of us, not just to me, by the command headquarters who ordered us to go up there.

PS: That includes both survivors and...

LG: No.

PS: ...just the...

LG: No, that includes those that were burned up only.

PS: Oh, oh. Can you estimate oh like how many survivors?

LG: There were, as I said, there were some 900 slave labor in the town called Letzlingen, Germany. That's the place that we captured. There must have been three or four hundred of the ones in the striped suits who were lying around in the ditches, as we

went down the road to capture the town of Letzlingen. The number of slave labor in the other towns that surrounded us, I have no idea what they were.

PS: No. Were you able to save, or did you have time to stop and render any medical aid to any of those that were still living but in very critical...

LG: No, that was assigned, as I said to you. We, our job was to get into Letzlingen and take possession of it. The, there were service troops that had been assigned by command to take care of the others. And, you know, and I'd been in the army a long time and I had learned, you do your job, and let everybody else do their job, and the results are accomplished. So, those people were being gathered up by ambulances...

PS: Yeah.

LG: And by others whose job it was to gather them up.

PS: Right. So there was no personal responsibility of you or your unit, as far as treatment of the living.

LG: No, no. In, of those that were well enough, that did not have to be gathered up, we took the responsibility of putting them into separate camps and seeing to it that they...

PS: Oh, oh.

LG: Got fed...

PS: Oh, yes.

LG: And we appointed the German storekeepers as our means to feed them. And we appointed soldiers to be in the stores so that when the slave labor lined up, they lined up along with the Germans right in the same line. And they were fed just as the German population was fed. The same rations, the same everything, along with all the other population and on an equal scale.

PS: Can you describe the reaction of the survivors when they realized that at last their day had come, that they were then free and liberated?

LG: They almost went crazy. They really didn't know how to accept freedom. They, it took a while, I think, for them to realize and to come back to being hu-, free, human beings. And when I say a while, a 24-hour period, which is a long time for people to run wild. And, they finally settled down and started to organize themselves and get along with each other and decide that they began to act like human beings, rather than the animals that they had been treated, as they had been treated through the years.

PS: As you and your unit approached this barn and the general area, were you aware, were there any to your knowledge, was there any German military still at that site?

LG: Yeah. They were not at that site. The German military was still active in the woods that surrounded the site. They stayed out of our way as much as possible. We went around them, rather than hitting them head on, because they were cut off from supply--surrender and there was no sense taking the risk of getting killed doing something that was unnecessary. And so in the towns themselves, and where we occupied

the land, there was, there were no, the German military at that time didn't show its face. The civilian population, however, was another problem. The German civilian population was extremely hostile. They, the animosity they had toward us was extr-, evident completely. And, we had one tragedy in the town called Letzlingen. When we moved into an area, the first American soldiers, when we did run into civilian population, the first order was that everybody had to turn in all their weapons. And we designated all of their cameras, all of their optical material, and we designated areas where all these had to be turned in. And then anybody caught with a weapon after that was in, was in trouble as far as we were concerned. A German man turned over a little hair gun, hair trigger handgun, that fits in the palm of your hand. They had these small weapons that you could hide so easily. He turned it over to one of our officers and the officer turned around to look at it, and there, it was loaded on hair trigger and the thing went off and hit him right in the head and killed him on the spot. You had to be careful of these boobie traps set by German civilians. They were not soldiers. The certain German civilian population in these places at this time was extremely hostile.

PS: Did you in any way realize at that time that what you were seeing at that point, at that spot, was only one of possibly thousands and thousands of places like it, and much worse, a much larger scale?

LG: We didn't realize it at the time, but it didn't take very long afterward for us to begin to understand what was happening all across Germany.

PS: Did the experience of seeing all these examples of the unbelievable acts of inhumanity, did it have any effect on your feeling of being a part of the war and fighting Germany?

LG: Not fighting the war, but it's had a very deep effect on what has happened since. There is definitely a, well, I would call it a guilt feeling, of how stupid could we have been not to know what was going on in advance. And that if we had known the possibility, that having known we would have been more active and more aggressive in trying to save people. And that there were people who were not saved because we were negligent in not knowing what was taking place. That's one of the reasons why I refrain from using the word "liberator", because we really did not know what we were doing. We had no forewarning. And it's a, really to our discredit that we did not find out what was happening, and that we were not much more aggressive in trying to become liberators and actually go out and consciously try to save people.

PS: Do you recall if you discussed your reaction with other men in your unit after seeing this? And do you believe that your reaction of most or all of the men in your unit was much the same as your reactions?

LG: I was the only Jew in my unit, and as far as I know I'm the only Jewish American soldier in the area except for one other, and that was the man that I told you got killed by being shot in the head. And, so he didn't have any reaction, because he died right there. And so, being the only Jew, I imagine my reaction was not similar to the

others, that it was a different type of reaction. However, the others were deeply moved. They were angry. They were upset. They could not imagine human beings behaving in the way these people had behaved. They couldn't come to grips with the concept and the idea that you could take 3500 people and put them in a barn and burn 'em up. They couldn't come to grips with the idea that you could take people and put them in slave camps in this day and age, that people could be enslaved, and made to work as slaves. And this anger began to show itself and began to mount in the rubber factory, the synthetic rubber factory, that I described earlier. And it, I believe, resulted at that time in a much more hostile attitude toward the German civilian population that we ran into, than the attitude toward the German civilians that was evident before we ran into these atrocities. Before that time it was just that we were fighting a war. And they were soldiers, and we were in their country, and naturally they didn't like us. But after these atrocities became apparent, there was a hardening of attitude and a real development of hostility toward the civilian population.

PS: [softly] I think we, I think I'm gonna cut off on the-

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

PS: Ah, Leonard, continuing this experience, about how long did you remain at the site?

LG: We were there approximately four days.

PS: No doubt the memories of this experience lingered long after you left?

LG: I believe that some of my activities in the community of Philadelphia, activities that I indulge in in support of the state of Israel, are to a good deal extent based on some of these experience, some of the motivation has been as a result of these experiences that made me understand the extreme need for a country like Israel and the necessity to make sure that it is strong and defensible.

PS: So, without doubt you do believe it has had a very strong influence on your thinking and actions as you look back on your experience.

LG: Oh, very much so, very much so.

PS: And still at that time, just to repeat, you in no way thought that this, that there were thousands of sites like this, or that there were many, 3500, --when we speak of an Auschwitz, a Mauthausen, a Buchenwald where there are hundreds and hundreds of thousands, almost inconceivable, and that many of them were not discovered until after you had your experience which was say around the 15th of April, and Buchenwald, Dachau and many others were not uncovered until the last week of the war, the last week of April.

LG: From the Elbe River we pulled back to a little town called Pattensen, eight miles north of Hanover, Germany; and it was there that I finally began to get the full dimension of what had taken place; and it was there that the full impact was uncovered and where we found out that there were six million dead and that the atrocities were far beyond anything anybody could imagine, and the full impact of what had taken place began to sink in in Pattensen and Hanover.

PS: When you say six million dead, of course, I feel at this point everyone realizes the total was between probably 12 and 13 million.

LG: And the total was more. There were some 20 million Russians killed. There were, so I want to separate. For me, the Holocaust is the Jewish tragedy and that's the six million. The tragedy of the others is a tragedy of tremendous importance. I wish someone would give it a different name. The tragedy of the 20 million Russians is a tremendous tragedy, the tragedy of the six or seven million non-Jews who were killed for whatever reasons, and there were multiple reasons, is a tragedy, the enslavement of millions of people, non-Jews and Jews is a tragedy; but for me the Holocaust is the six million Jews.

PS: Thinking that this was the only group, the only ethnic group where the victims of an actual planned extermination. In your own mind and you ever begin to explain German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

LG: For me there is no explanation. I have used the phrase in some of the speeches I've given that the Holocaust was a Christian tragedy, the Jews were the victims and I explain it in this way: That the Holocaust proves that mankind has not, with all of the scientific developments and all the increases in creature comforts, mankind has not progressed one iota in his behavior from the caveman. He's still living in the cave, he is still out hunting, he still is out killing the tribe around the corner for no reason other than that they are strangers. Civilization is really a creature comfort civilization and nothing has changed. The Holocaust proves that nobody has yet become civilized. The Jews were the victims.

PS: How long after this experience of these 3500 did you first hear of the gassing of Jews, the extermination of the Jewish people as an ethnic group?

LG: The first I began to understand the nature of the, and the dimensions, of the Holocaust was when I got to Pattensen Germany and to Hanover. In Hanover we began to get the news that was not filtered, that was not prevented from reaching us by war, because the war officially was over, and we are able to listen to news broadcasts and to receive news in the more normal channels, in more normal atmosphere. We're also able to talk to people on a different basis. In Pattensen, Germany there were still slaves who had been freed. When we reached Pattensen, Germany there was still a colony of Polish, mostly Polish, slave laborers that had been used to work on the farms, it was a farm area, where the civilian population fed the pigs first with slop and then the slop was that was left over was fed to the slave labor. These people were now free waiting to be transported back to their own country. As I said they were mostly Polish, non-Jews, living among the people who had enslaved them. In this particular area, the German population could not have been nicer or sweeter to us; but these nice people who treated us so nicely, eh, the investigators were all around the place because these lovely people who looked very much like everybody else's mother and father, the stories were that when our pilots bailed out in this particular area, they had to hope that the German army captured them, because if these nice peace-loving farmers captured them, they killed them with the pitchforks before the army could reach them. And so these were the things that we ran into. In Hanover I was assigned a job of inventorying a half-track factory that was pretty well bombed out. The half-track factory had been manned completely by slave labor. Again, it was a factory in which pill boxes were set up inside the factory. The supervisors stood in the pillbox because if they stepped out of the pill box without protection, the slave labor would kill them on the spot. The slave labor that worked there were worked to death and when they were dead, new slave labor was brought in to work the factory. The factory had been completely manned by slaves, and I inventoried the machinery which later on I was informed was to be dismantled and taken out and taken to other places for use someplace else after the war was over, hopefully someplace not in Germany. That was really one of the areas where I firsthand began to realize the full dimensions of the Holocaust and what had taken place. While I was at Pattensen I also

got word of the fact that there was a hospital in which the Jewish survivors had been gathered and were being rehabilitated. I took the time, we were preparing to go, to be ready to go to the Pacific, we were ready under orders to ship out of Marseilles to go to the Pacific theater. We didn't really have much free time, but I took the time to go visit the factory hospital. I didn't realize that things had changed, and I took a lot of bread up with me, which of course was unnecessary; they had all the food they could eat. I'll never forget one man in his fifties who I, was really the one person who latched onto me and we spoke in Yiddish. He was dressed in a beautiful double breasted blue suit; and I was told, before I spoke to him, that he lived in the suit 24 hours a day and refused to take it off. He spoke to me about the fact that he strutted up and down in the suit and said, "Isn't this a beautiful suit". And wanted to show me the beautiful suit he was wearing. And he said to me "You know before all of this started, I used to wear much finer clothes than this". And he stopped and said, "I'm not complaining; this is a beautiful suit".

PS: And Leonard we just about reached the end of our formal questions. Is there anything you would like to add before we sign off?

LG: Not really, because from there we moved in a hurry down to Marseilles, and from Marseilles I shipped through Panama to the Pacific, and until I got back to the Unites States, I lost complete contact with anything that was Jewish or with anything that was connected with the European war or with anything that was connected with any civilization.

PS: This is the completion of the interview with Phil Solomon with Leonard Goldfine, a veteran, U. S. Army veteran of World War Two who has given us very meaningful and importance testimony as to his experience. And Leonard, on behalf of Gratz College and the Holocaust Archives, we certainly want to thank you very, very much. Thank you.

[Tape one, side two ended.]