HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

EDWARD KILISKY

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: November 12, 1987

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EK - Edward Kilisky [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: November 12, 1987

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Edward Kilisky. The date is November 12th, 1987. Mr. Kilisky, please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp.

EK: I was serving with the 3rd Field Artillery Observation Battalion. And we came into France about D plus 27, 28. And we went through France, Germany, and at the end of the war we were in Austria.

PS: D plus 27 or 28 would have been somewhere around July 1st, 1943?

EK: No, 1944.

PS: 1944. Around July 1st, 19...

EK: July 1st, somewhere around there.

PS: Yeah. And do you recall approximately what date you first set foot on German soil?

EK: German, New Years, Christmas 1944 until New Year 1945 we were right, we were in a place called Saarbrücken. This was, I think, about the time of the Bulge, which was right across from Germany. And we moved into Germany, I would say it must have been in the latter part of January of 1945, or early February.

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

EK: No. No, no.

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

EK: The first time I heard of a possible problem was in France when, it was about Rosh, it was Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur of 1944. We were at a little town called Lunéville, and there was a synagogue, abandoned synagogue in this town. And the army chaplain set up for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. At the services, some civilians showed up, and these were French Jews. And they intimated that Jews were deported, and they were hidden out in the woods. This was the first that we really had any knowledge that there could be a problem where there were camps where they were putting Jews.

PS: Please give the name of the camp you liberated and its location. Also the date, if possible, when you arrived at the camp site.

EK: The camp that I was one of the liberators was Dachau, which was in the town of Dachau, which was maybe twenty-five or thirty miles north of Munich. We arrived

in Dachau about eight o'clock in the morning toward, in the latter part of April. Whether it was the 21st or 22nd, I don't know the exact date.

PS: That's April, 1945, correct.

EK: April 1945, that's correct. When we arrived in the town of Dachau--I think I better go back and, to give you some idea of the function of our organization. Our organization was responsible for forward observation for artillery by use of what was then called electronic means. And we also were responsible for meteorology for artillery, so we had to, we moved where they anticipated establishing a front. And they had anticipated establishing a front north of Munich. And we were ordered to go into Dachau to establish ourselves there. When we arrived in Dachau, the first thing we did, we moved into houses, to take over houses, and threw the civilians out. The house that I lived in, there was one room that was locked, and we asked the owner of the house why this room was not open, and she said they expected that the Americans were going to come and they put their personal property into this room.

PS: Pardon. This was in the town of Dachau.

EK: In the town of Dachau.

PS: Not the camp.

EK: No, I have to get up to when we got there.

PS: Right.

EK: When I got to the camp--some friends of mine set themselves up in a neighboring house and I went into visit them, and they were attempting to start a fire in a stove in the kitchen, but the fire would not take, and smoke was coming out of the flue. We took this, the stove pipe apart, and the pipe was clean, but in the chimney there, we saw a paper bag. And we pulled out the paper bag, and the paper bag was full of wedding ba-, gold wedding bands. We couldn't understand why someone would hide, or how someone would have this number of wedding bands. Coincidentally at the same time, some of our fellows came running down the road saying, "Drop whatever you're doing and go up the road. You won't believe what they have there." And when we got there, this was Dachau concentration camp. And there were boxcars there with people who were dead, others who were dying. There was one area where the, apparently the inmates suspected that the war was over, and they attacked the, attacked the Germans who were there. And there was one area where they had killed the guards, maybe not all of them, but a good number of them. The ovens were not burning. There were other spots where you had dead bodies laying on the railroad tracks. They had piles of bodies, and also piles of various types of clothing and shoes and things like that. We all went back to our houses, and at that point, in the house where I was living, we decided to see what was in this locked room. And we opened up, broke down the door to this locked room, and there was a German SS officer laying in bed who was ill. And at the same time--and this could have been in a matter of hours and I say at the same time--we were ordered to leave Dachau and proceed to Munich. And so we left there after about two hours. I would say we left there about maybe eleven o'clock in the

morning, and we arrived in Dach-, in Munich maybe at 12:30. And we, then another order came along, and we proceeded to Berchtesgaden.

PS: You mentioned that there were dead guards, German guards, probably killed by, by survivors after the, most of the guards had left. Were there any German guards, German army officers, still alive who were at, in the Dachau prison camp when you arrived?

EK: None.

PS: None at all?

EK: The only thing that you saw were the dead, and the living inmates, those who were living.

PS: Can you estimate how many prisoners were there in Dachau?

EK: I have no idea of the number. We didn't spend that much time. But all I know is in the boxcars that were on the railroad siding there were hundreds and hundreds of dead bodies.

PS: Were there many dead bodies of surv-, of prisoners that you observed within the camp?

EK: Yes.

PS: Laying...

EK: Laying around. Laying around. It's like someone was walking and he dropped dead in his tracks right there.

PS: Right.

EK: And they really weren't, they really weren't people. They were skeletons, with skin on them.

PS: Can you estimate how many were living? Survivors, prisoners who were still alive when you first entered the camp?

EK: I, I would have no idea of the number that. Subsequently in Austria I met quite a number of survivors, who had been inmates at Dachau. But I have no idea of the numbers.

PS: When you and your unit entered the camp, the camp of Dachau, had any other American units preceded you into the...

EK: As far as we know, no one preceded us in. We were the first ones in there. We were there for a couple hours, and then we moved out, and there were other troops that followed us in to occupy Dachau.

PS: During the few hours that you were there, were you able to do anything at all for the survivors?

EK: We were told to stay away from them, not to give them any food, because the worst thing that could happen if we started to give them food, those who had a chance of living would die. And the other thing, our medical corps told us that we, they had no idea what type of diseases these people may have had, and they would have to determine

that first. And the medical people, and we only had about six or seven medics. The medics took care of the people.

PS: Then prisoners that you observed, survivors that is, who possibly were near death, depended on medics, medical units who followed you, your unit, into the camp?

EK: No, these were our own medical units.

PS: Yes.

EK: The people. And they, when we left they left and other troops came in.

PS: Yeah.

EK: Which I assume were the troops that were gonna take care of these people.

PS: Right. And they obviously were equipped to do more for them.

EK: Right.

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

EK: This was a mixed camp, becau-, and, as a matter of fact, in this camp they even had Germans there who were considered Communists and were interned in Dachau. Because in Austria I met several Christians, Christian people, who were interned in Dachau. And both of these, both of these men had socialist, what they called socialist leanings.

PS: Do you have any knowledge at all as to the ratio of Jews to non-Jews in Dachau?

EK: Yeah, like 99% Jews and 1% non-Jews.

PS: Do you have any idea what the nationality groups were, nationality groups?

EK: From the survivors that I met who were at Dachau, the majority of them were Polish, Polish Jews.

PS: Did you see any children there?

EK: No. No children.

PS: You'd say none below the age of like 14, 15, 16?

EK: Well, really it was hard to determine whether someone was 14 or someone was 20 or someone was 30, because in their physical condition they all looked like old people.

PS: You were there for such a short period of time that obviously you had been assigned no responsibilities in arranging for care or...

EK: No.

PS: Transfer of prisoners.

EK: Nothing.

PS: Please describe the reactions of the prisoners as you entered the camp.

EK: Apparently they had some knowledge that the Americans were coming, coming in. They may not have known when the Americans were gonna arrive, and those that were able to get around, really they, they were walking around dazed. To me, my impression, is that this was a new experience for them, because if they outlasted the

Germans and they had no expectation of surviving, that the fact that they survived left them a little dazed, a little foggy. There was no, there was no joy. No one was jumping up and down. There was no embracing or anything like that.

PS: Was there very much of a language barrier? Could, did you yourself or any of those close to you, were they able to converse with survivors?

EK: There was no language barrier for me, because I spoke Yiddish. And I was able to have conversation. But even the conversation that you had with these people was kind of jumbled at that point, because there was total confusion. There was confusion on our part because we never expected to run into anything like this. That's number one. Number two, our mission wasn't to re-, to liberate this camp and take care of the people. So, we just didn't know what was happening. [tape off then on]

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

EK: Well, the thing that I couldn't understand, and the thing that bothers me till, until today is, that the Germans as a people, as a country--they were supposed to be intelligent, high culture--could do a, could commit those crimes. That's number one. And number two, how the civilian population could deny that these camps existed, and their standard answer was, "We didn't know anything about this," and including the civilian population that lived in Dachau. It's just unreal what people can do, what other humans, what one human being can do to others. The other thing that kind of disturbed me, occurred subsequently in Austria, where the Austrians, who, in my opinion, were worse than the Germans, tried to pretend that the Americans were coming in to liberate their country, that they were the same as every other occupied country.

PS: Before you saw the first evidence of the unspeakable horrors being done by the Nazi regime in Germany, in other words, when you entered France and fought through France, and then set foot on German soil and fought in Germany, at that time did you have any idea at all of what was being done to the Jews of Germany?

EK: As far as the killings? None. But we, I did have some experience prior to going into the army here in Philadelphia, because if you go back into the late '30s and early '40s, the German American Bund was created here. And you could, you could feel the antisemitism coming from this organization as well. And going into Germany, the one thing that was obvious in going through cities and towns, the lack of seeing any Jewish people. So it was an indicator that something was wrong. But as far as the actual camps, I had no knowledge of it whatsoever.

PS: You have just told us of your own personal feelings about being a part of the war. Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? Did you talk with them afterwards about what you had experienced?

EK: Not only did we talk about it then, we still talk about it today. And everyone has the same feeling--and our organization was primarily composed of Christians, very few

Jewish fellows--and the feeling of those who attend reunions, when we get around to this, is that they can't believe what the Germans did to the Jews.

PS: Can you please tell me how long you, well, you've already mentioned that you just remained in the camp for approximately two hours, did your experience linger after you left?

EK: The experience lingered, and some time in June of 1945 I met my wife in a DP camp, and I had a lot of exposure to survivors, not only from Dachau, but from Auschwitz and other concentration camps. And so I ha-, really familiar with what these people went through in their life prior to the end of World War II.

PS: Has all of this had a great deal of influence on your thinking as you look back?

EK: I would say that it has a tremendous amount of thinking, eh, influence on my thinking. I've developed certain hang-ups as a result of this. Number one, we do travel abroad, and we will not go into Germany, and we will not go into Austria. In addition, we know a number of survivors, particularly males, who during, after they were liberated in 1945, married German women. And that's one thing that I can't get through my head is how someone who has survived the concentration camps could ever marry a German woman.

PS: When you saw Dachau and were aware of the horrors and the number of people that had lived and died at, in this one particular concentration camp, were you aware at this time that this was only one of many concentration camps?

EK: No. No. Subsequently, I would say this must have been early in May, about May 5th or 6th, when we were in Salzburg, Austria, we took over the, there was a camp in Hallein, Austria which was a prisoner of war camp only for SS And we took over the responsibility of this SS camp. And in some discussions I had with the soldiers who were imprisoned there came out that there were other camps of this, of the same nature.

PS: When you, you went from Dachau to Munich. Then from Munich you proceeded south into Austria?

EK: No, from Munich, apparently so-, they were under the impression that the last stand by the Germans was gonna be in Berchtesgaden. So, we moved from Munich, we, as a matter of fact, I don't think we spent more than a half hour in Munich. The only thing that we did in Munich, there was a prisoner of war camp there that was predominantly Australian and British. And we did some, I don't recall exactly what we did at that camp, because we were there a very short period of time. I'm almost sure the only thing we did was give them K rations and C rations and things like that. And then we moved on to Berchtesgaden because they thought that there was gonna be a front established up in the Alps. And we arrived at, in Berchtesgaden, I would say, maybe about four o'clock in the afternoon.

PS: As you proceeded south of Munich, into southern Bavaria and then into Austria, as you moved along, did you see many or any survivors of concentration camps wandering through the woods, free, and no place to go?

EK: We didn't come, we didn't go through wooded areas at that point. We stuck to the *Autobahn*. And you had, going, coming north on the *Autobahn* you had the Germans, and they were on the, they would be on our left, because we were driving on the right hand side. And straggling along you would see civilians that were rather haggard looking. Some were in unif-, the striped uniforms, and others looked like they were just in any old rags that they were wearing.

PS: Did your experiences have any effect on your faith in your religion? Your faith in Judaism?

EK: None whatsoever.

PS: No effect. After you left the camp, was there any official or unofficial meeting of your unit to discuss what you had experienced at the camp?

EK: No.

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

EK: Yes. We do have a history, and I attempted to find it. That includes a map, which shows our route, from landing in France, right through the end of the war. Plus we had a little pamphlet that we published. But unfortunately [chuckling] I can't find them!

PS: But there was, this was published in...

EK: Yeah.

PS: The official records of your...

EK: I don't know if it's published in the official Army records, but from our reunion group we have a...

PS: Later did you hear of any other servicemen, beside those in your own unit, who were involved in the liberation of camps?

EK: Yes, I did meet some after the war was over, in Austria. But these fellows that I met were, I met them in DP camps and they were predominantly Jewish.

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

EK: I guess the first I heard of gassing of Jews was some time in June, early June, from the people who were in the DP camps. Because some of the men, DP, some of the men who were liberated from Auschwitz, who were able to survive, and had jobs in the camps, some of them would clean out the gas chambers. Others would take the dead bodies and put them in the ovens. Others would take clothing and hair and things like that and assemble it.

PS: How long did you remain in Europe after the war?

EK: I left Europe in December of 1945.

PS: Which was about six months...

EK: Six months.

PS: After the war.

EK: After the war.

PS: During that period did you learn much more about details of the Nazi atrocities and Nazi horrors? Did you learn of the number of Jews and political prisoners that had been destroyed in...

EK: Yes, I did. And when I returned to the United States in January 1946, I volunteered, until I found a job, to speak on this subject for Allied Jewish Appeal.

PS: During that six-month period, after the end of the war and the time that you returned to the United States, did you experience seeing very many of the survivors of concentration camps return? Well, in what part of Germany were you at that time?

EK: I was in Salzburg, Austria.

PS: Oh.

EK: And the survivors who were in the DP camps, at that particular time, had one objective: they wanted to go from Europe to then what was known as Palestine. They were not interested in going back to Poland, if they were Polish, to resettle. They, those who were from Romania, their one object was to get out of Europe.

PS: While you were in the Salzburg area, did many of those Jews who had been taken from their homes in the Salzburg area return to Salzburg, to your knowledge?

EK: I really, the only thing I know about whether or not, I don't know if any returned, but I do know that Jewish property was taken over, and they moved Germans into the property. They brought them from Germany and moved them into these homes in Salzburg, Austria. Immediately after the war, there was an attempt made--I shouldn't say an attempt, it actually came to fruition--these Germans were deported back to Germany. Now what happened to the property, I, whether [unclear] Jews showed up for that or they were taken over by the State, I have no idea.

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

EK: If you don't see it with your own eyes, it's very difficult to believe that people would commit these type of crimes.

PS: Would you like to add anything additional to your testimony?

EK: Well, the only thing that I feel that it's worthwhile saying is, that, for those who listen to this, *you believe it. It did happen.*

PS: Well, Mr. Edward Kilisky, we thank you very much for your very important testimony.