

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SYDNEY LESSER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: December 14, 1988

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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SYDNEY LESSER [1-1-1]

SL - Sydney Lesser [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: December 14, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing Mr. Sydney Lesser, for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is December 14th, 1988. Sydney, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

SL: I was with the 639th Automatic Weapons, Anti-aircraft Battalion. We had come to France, and went through Belgium and Germany and finally, finally our final destination was Weimar, Germany.

PS: At that time, Syd, did you know of the existence of the particular camp that you would liberate before you arrived there?

SL: No, I had no idea. I had never, never even heard of Buchenwald prior to this.

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

SL: We had no definite information, but we had heard rumors. We knew that Jews were being killed. We knew there were massacres, but we had no confirmed information or proof.

PS: Before arriving at the site of the concentration camp, had you seen any evidence of German atrocities against civilians in, within Germany or occupied countries?

SL: We had encountered a lot of Polish and Russian prisoners of war, which had been liberated before we arrived. But, and we heard of brutality, but we did not witness any.

PS: You had heard of brutality within the prisoner of war camps?

SL: Yes.

PS: Did you see any American PWs at that time?

SL: No, not at all.

PS: From what you heard, would you say that you were under the impression that the Germans were adhering reasonably well to the terms of the Geneva Convention?

SL: Well, we did not think a whole lot about the Convention. We had heard that the Germans were brutal, that a, the men really were worried about being captured, were not likely to get captured, because they were afraid of brutality with the Germans. But we had not witnessed any.

PS: Can you please give the name of the camp that you liberated, and its location?

SL: Well, we did not actually liberate it, but we came, came to Buchenwald within a few, a day or two, or a few days of its liberation. We were amongst the first troops there. The advance tank battalion, which had actually liberated, had, had moved out since then, and there were American occupation troops in charge.

PS: Can you recall the date that you arrived at the site of Buchenwald?

SL: No, I have no memory of it. It was, it was in April I believe.

PS: Yeah, I believe the date, the actual date that the first liberating troops arrived, I think, was April 18th...

SL: Right, yes.

PS: 1945.

SL: Yes. It was about that time of year.

PS: Yeah.

SL: It was spring, nice weather. But I, I don't remember the exact date.

PS: To the best of your memory, can you please describe what you saw at the camp and what you felt at the time?

SL: Well, one, as I say, when we got there it was already occupied by American troops. And the gates were closed. We could not get into it, but we could see inmates. And we saw really walking skeletons, but we had no--the first time I was there, I had no actual contact with, with the prisoners.

PS: Did you see any children among the survivors, or...

SL: We, at first visit we did not see any children. But, actually we took several, eventually we took several people out of the camp, including a Jewish child. We took a, a young boy named Leopold Loewy out of the camp, who I believe at the time was 14 years old. And we took another Jewish man. And we took several Polish prisoners who we used as supplementary kitchen help. But we--there was the one child, yes.

PS: When you entered Buchenwald, you saw bodies? Can you estimate approximately how many dead there were that...

SL: No, that we did not see. We did see, later when I came in, I actually saw people dying, walking around and falling over. And I was in the company of an American medical officer and he told me that many of these people he said were medically dead. They could do nothing for these people. They were still ambulatory, but they would die in very short time.

PS: They even experienced many cases where they couldn't even feed them, because there was just no digestive system.

SL: That's true. And of the people we took with us, they had many, many stomach problems before, before they could get adjusted to the food. One of, the man who we took out who served as my interpreter couldn't believe how the small amount of food that we ate, and when he ate it, he became ill on it. It was a strange situation.

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

SL: It was a mixed camp. There were Poles and Russians and Danes. I know there were Danes and there were Dutch in Buchenwald. But I know of this because of the, of the man who stayed with me after we liberated him from the camp.

PS: Can you, were there any personal responsibilities that you or your unit had been assigned for the, for the care of living?

SL: No, no, we, we took one man out to serve as an interpreter. We took this young boy out, out of compassion, and we took the Polish half a dozen, six or eight, Polish prisoners to work in the kitchens. But we had no other contact.

PS: Did you see at that time units that had been sent in to care for the...

SL: Oh yes. There were...

PS: That is food and medical supplies and...

SL: Oh yes.

PS: Medical officers, who were there especially for the purpose?

SL: Yes, the medical people were brought in and they were, they were very diligent in working with the prisoners. There was proper security and proper medical attention given to them.

PS: Although this was a few days after the actual liberation, can you describe the reaction of prisoners that you saw even a few days after? Emotions expressed or...

SL: Very, very little. What I saw mostly was lethargy and apathy. They were so weak, and they were so listless that--and of course we had the language difficulty. Most of my information came from this one man, Otto Feuer, who would tell me things that occurred. And he was with me for a month after liberated, so I had a multitude of stories. But they were all through one man.

PS: In other words you were not able to have any personal verbal communications with the...

SL: No.

PS: ...survivors themselves.

SL: Very little. I had some communications. There was a Czech professor asked me for some help, for some food. There were four French Army officers who contacted me and asked me for some help to find their way back to France. There was a Dutch young man who was able to speak English, told me lurid tales. I later discovered that this young Dutch boy was, an actual criminal, but I had no way of substantiating this.

PS: Were you personally satisfied that everything that could possibly be done by the living survivors was being done in consideration of the fact that this was probably one of the first concentration camps liberated within the American Zone and this was only like one or two days after the, the liberation. Do you feel that everything was being done for...

SL: Oh, I absolutely did. I really thought they were trying to be diligent. They closed the camp off to keep curious people away and--by what I learned from Otto, they did everything they could, yes. I can't see any fault with the American attention to the problem.

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

SL: Well, I don't think I needed any more indoctrination to fight the war. I was, yes, I had, had always known that Germany was the enemy, and Germany had to be destroyed. No, it didn't further my fervor.

PS: Do you think that the reactions of other men in your unit were much the same as your, your reactions?

SL: No, I think some of the Christian boys were startled to see the living conditions and the ovens and so forth. And when they saw the, the shelving that served as men's sleeping quarters, and the number of men on each, on each shelf, they, they were startled by it. They, the Christian boys seemed more affected than the few Jewish boys that we had.

PS: There was conversation later on this? That is, the exchange of feelings regarding this experience, among the men in your unit?

SL: Well, well it cemented the anti-German feeling with the, with many of the men, yes.

PS: How long did you remain in the camp after, well, how long...

SL: Actually I was in the camp very, very little. I was taken on a tour of the camp, a guided tour actually with a group of junior officers. And then I came up once or twice to--about picking up the interpreter, and then coming up to get him. But actually I was in the camp a very limited amount of time.

PS: Would you say that your experience lingered long after you left, and has it had any influence on your thinking as you look back?

SL: No, I, not really, not really, no. Nothing traumatic about it.

PS: After you saw Buchenwald, and the horrors, did you in your wildest imagination realize that this was only one of many, many concentration camps, and what you saw--which was a matter of a number of thousands of dead and survivors--that it would ever count up to say ten or twelve million victims?

SL: No, I had no idea of the scope of it. We did know there were others. We had heard other names and so forth, but we had no idea of the scope of it.

PS: In your own mind, is there any way that you can explain German decisions that led up to the setting of, the setting up of concentration camps?

SL: No it, to me it's absolutely insanity which did this. No rational explanation.

PS: Is there any regimental history of...

SL: Yeah.

PS: The experience of your...

SL: Well...

PS: Of your unit?

SL: Well, you know, I have the--do you want this book, *The Battalion Record*. And if you want to cut this off while you read that. Should I stop it?

PS: Yeah. [tape off then on] Syd, this regimental history that you just handed me, the book, is very descriptive, both in photographs and articles, on the experience. And we will make copies of this for the Gratz Holocaust Archive. That is the regimental history though, that would include the experience. Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of camps?

SL: Now I've heard of several. I just can't think of them at the moment. But I have since spoken to many other soldiers who were, were involved in the liberation of camps. I just can't bring them to mind. If I do I'll, at a later date, I'll let you know.

PS: Yeah. How long did you remain in Europe after the end of the war?

SL: Oh, we remained, I remained in Europe until November. But not in Germany. We were moved, we were moved to another part of Germany. And then we were moved to Marseilles. We spent a good bit of time in the Marseilles area.

PS: While you were in Germany at the end of the war, that is after the war, when the war ended, did you have any opportunity to observe German civilians and their reactions to...

SL: Oh yes, I had...

PS: ...or their reactions to knowledge then of what had been going on in the massacres?

SL: Yes, I, I had quite a good bit of contact with Germans. As a matter of fact in the very limited area where my headquarters was, I was the Military Governor because there was, I was the senior officer in the area, and Germans would have to come to me for permission to do various things. So I did have a lot of contact with Germans. And I would ask them questions. And most of them agreed that they knew there were atrocities. In fact they knew there were terrible things going on, but they would not admit to the, to the knowledge of the scope of it. They knew there were Jews, and they knew there were enemies being murdered, but they, they, they refused to admit they knew the scope of it. Also, when, when speaking to them they very freely admitted that they were all in favor of Hitler. However, at this time they thought Hitler was a madman. But, oddly enough, they all would readily admit when Hitler was successful, they were in favor of Hitler. Most, I think, most other people would, would disclaim all allegiance to him. But no, the Germans still insisted that he was right in the beginning.

PS: During that short period of time that you remained in Germany after the end of the war, did you observe any survivors of concentration camps returning to their communities from which they had been gathered up?

SL: No. No, as a matter of fact when I spoke to Otto, I asked him did he want to go back to Hamburg. And he was very vehement that he was getting out of Germany. No bones about wanting to get out of Germany.

PS: Syd, we have covered all the questions that I had planned on asking. Do you, would you like to, is there anything that you would like to add to your testimony?

SL: Well, yes, there, there are a couple of anecdotes which might be, might be worth retaining if they're not already. They probably recorded. But, I was present at the excavation of the mass grave that had been, into which thousands of Jews had been thrown. And of course this has all been recorded. But I--did witness it. And I, in spite of the unbelievable smell, the unbelievable stench, I stood there for an hour and watched the German civilians carrying the dead bodies out of this vast pit into which they had been thrown. I did see that. And one other thing, one other anecdote which I think is, could be, if it has not been recorded, it should be recorded. When we were, when I was driving to Buchenwald to pick up Otto Feuer, who was to be my interpreter, I was in a Jeep with my driver. And as we were driving down the road we saw a group of men carrying a pallet with--that was covered. And we could see blood. And--oh, there were six, eight, ten men around it, carrying it toward the camp. And my driver said, "I wonder what that is." And I said, "Oh the, you know, the released prisoners are ransacking the countryside. They've probably killed a pig or something like that and they're carrying it back to the camp to cook it." And then the next day when I spoke to Otto I recounted the experience. I was telling, we were talking about the looting and so forth, and I told him about what I thought had been a pig or a calf or something. And he said, "You saw the, them bringing the camp commandant in." A bunch of the eastern European prisoners had caught the camp commandant, and they were in the process of beating him to death when a Jew threw his body across the Camp Commandant and said, "No, you must not kill him!" It was a *Jew* who saved his life, from the Polish and Russian prisoners. It was a Jew who prevented them from killing him. He said, "He must tell his story!" I thought, I thought this was a most wonderful thing, that it was a Jew who saved the life of a--he could not participate in the violence, and if this story has not been recounted before, I think this could be a...

PS: Oh I'm sure...

SL: Very revelant [sic] fact.

PS: Yeah, I'm sure it will be. When you--this brings one other question to my mind. When you entered Buchenwald, were there still any German guards remaining?

SL: I don't, I don't think so. I think they, they had long gone. As a matter of fact, Otto told me when the Americans got to the camp, there--no Germans were there. They had slipped out the day before or the morning before. But, all of the Germans had deserted the camp before the Americans even came in contact. But that there was no effort to defend the camp.

PS: Syd, this tape and its--the transcript that will be made will become a part of the Gratz College Oral History of the Holocaust. And on behalf of Gratz College, I want

SYDNEY LESSER [1-1-7]

to thank you very, very much for your certainly valuable and very important testimony.
Thank you.

SL: Thank you.