

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SAMUEL PERLMAN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: April 19, 1990

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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SAMUEL PERLMAN [I-I-1]

SP - Samuel Perlman [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: April 19, 1990

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Samuel Perlman for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is April 19, 1990. Mr. Perlman, can you tell us where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

SP: I was a member of the 97th Infantry Division. We were at that time a part of the 3rd Army.

PS: And where in Europe, you landed in France?

SP: We landed in France in Le Havre. They got us on these forty and eights I guess you would call them, those boxcars. And we went into the town of Neuss, which is opposite Düsseldorf. And our objective was to go to Düsseldorf.

PS: Yeah. At that time the fighting front was in Germany.

SP: Yes.

PS: Now prior to arriving at the site of the atrocities that you witnessed, had you at that time heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews in Europe?

SP: Some, some, but not too much, because we were always on the go. It was an, not that much.

PS: You did not realize the extent, the numbers of concentration camps and the numbers that were, the final figures of victims?

SP: No.

PS: At that time, in going through France and being in Germany, prior to your, the discovery of a concentration camp, had you at any, at that time seen any evidence of Nazi atrocities in Europe?

SP: No.

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

SP: Well it was in the Bavarian Alps. It's Flossenbürg. And, I don't know if this is the town or not because I--Schutzhafthager.¹ It's a small town, and it laid in the Bavarian Alps. And the concentration camp was there a place where they cut stones up and they carted them away. And the SS troops were right outside the concentration camp in buildings that, up on a hill that looked down on the concentration camp.

PS: Do you remember approximately the date that you discovered this concentration camp?

¹A labor sub-camp of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp.

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SP: Well, it was, I would imagine it would be the 1st of May or the last part of April.

PS: Of 19-...

SP: Of 1945.

PS: '45. Right. Were you, was your unit one of the first to enter? Now the name of the camp was Flossenbürg?

SP: Yeah.

PS: Yeah. Was your unit one of the first to enter?

SP: Our battalion had, which is comprised of three infantry regiments plus support groups, they were the first to come in on that concentration camp.

PS: Now to the best of your memory, can you please describe what you saw, and what you felt at that time?

SP: Well when we came up there, the medics had been in already, and they had wire, the gates as, I think they called them the cyclone gates, surrounding the concentration camp. Not only the gates, but around the perimeter of the concentration camp and they had--it was all electrified and we, at that time the current wasn't on, but the people who were able were up against that wire fence looking out, looking for help. Some of them were emaciated. They were very, very thin. I remember one man had a blanket over him against the fence and he looked like a ghost. And those who were very bad were in the hospital wards and they couldn't be moved. Even the medics couldn't move them. They just, they were laying there to die. And you want me to tell...

PS: Yeah, well can you estimate like how many were still living...

SP: Well, it was...

PS: In...

SP: It was, oh, that I don't know. But if it was made for I think 15, 1600 people to be housed there, but they had 16,000 in there at one time. And they had also ovens at the end of the concentration camp opposite a tower, which I visited, and the oven was there and the bodies were laying there on, maybe about 100 bodies thrown up like wood, cords of wood...

PS: Yeah.

SP: And they were just skin and bones. And the, if you'd look at the bodies they had a wax type of look, the bodies that were laying there. And the oven, they had a stretcher that went right into the oven, where they put the body on, and they would shove it into the oven and burn, burn the body. And alongside of that oven was a very large pile of human ash. And there were bones on, still on the tray, still on that stretcher. It was a ghastly sight, and it was--the stench was just terrible. You just couldn't stay there too long.

PS: They probably had been using the ovens right up until...

SP: We came in.

PS: Shortly before the liberation. Can you estimate how many bodies that you saw, that were...

SP: I thought there was about close to 100 bodies laying there.

PS: Yeah.

SP: See?

PS: And were...

SP: And the--in the crematoria, laying there alongside the oven. There were other people in there that they couldn't move. And some of them were that could move, that were able to get around and they helped some of the people to, the soldiers to care for those that could be moved. And I saw a young boy there, his parents were killed there, and he had no place to go. And in fact one of my buddies there at that time, a man, a fellow by the name of, his last name was Israel, he struck up an acquaintance with one of them, and he took an address down where he contacted somebody in the States for him to try to get them together.

PS: Of the bodies that you saw, Mr. Perlman, was there any evidence that they had been gassed? And was there a gas chamber?

SP: I didn't see a gas chamber.

PS: Was there any evidence as to whether the, these people had been shot or whether they died possibly of disease and starvation?

SP: Disease and starvation. They were...

PS: Probably, most of them...

SP: ...skin and bone.

PS: Yeah. At that time was your unit equipped to treat--you say medics, the medics were in there.

SP: Yeah. To, every...

PS: The medics...

SP: ...every division had a medic corps.

PS: Yeah, the medical battalion. Were they able to, was your unit or those, the medics, were they prepared to treat these people and to feed the, was there food with which to feed them, the survivors?

SP: I really don't remember that. Let me just say that we were on the go. We were moving up because of this redoubt area that the Germans had more or less, and their last hope to be able to exist and to fight back. And we were part of Patton's Army, and we were only there a few, short time. And we stood guard there for a while, a day, and we moved on.

PS: You had a military mission to be...

SP: Yeah.

PS: ...accomplished.

SP: Right.

PS: Were there any guards still, that is German SS or prison guards there when you arrived do you know?

SP: They all fled.

SAMUEL PERLMAN [1-1-4]

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

SP: It was a mixed camp.

PS: Do you have any idea of what nationality groups were there?

SP: There were Jews. There were Czechs, Poles, Russians, and Germans in this camp.

PS: You mentioned before about a, seeing a boy. Were there any number of children that you observed when you entered?

SP: No, this is the only one that I had seen.

PS: Just the...

SP: This young boy.

PS: Just one.

SP: Yeah.

PS: Can you describe the reactions of the prisoners as you entered the camp? Their reactions, their behavior...

SP: Oh, they were overjoyed.

PS: Yeah.

SP: They were overjoyed.

PS: It was a day they had been waiting for for a long time.

SP: Yeah, liberated.

PS: And the medics were prepared to some extent to deal with the situation with medical supplies.

SP: Well after all they were a field outfit, you know.

PS: Yeah.

SP: They were on the go also.

PS: Oh. Do you have any idea of the distribution of food and supplies, or weren't you there long enough to...

SP: No.

PS: Yeah. Did the experience of seeing this having any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

SP: Yes, I, many times I doubted why we were there. But when I saw this I knew that this was very, very important that we should liberate these people and eliminate this oppression. I'll tell you a little incident. I--there was a little, the town was by the foothill of this concentration camp. And I went down there and I met some of the German people. It was in a garage type of building which was a butcher shop. And I went in there and this butcher was cutting up some meat and I asked him, "Do you know, or don't, what is happening over here?" And there were some women there, and some other people there. And they said no, they didn't know anything. I guess they didn't want to know, didn't want me to know that they knew. But this man had been in America prior to that time, had been

a cab driver in the United States and then had gone back to Germany. But they knew. They knew.

PS: Yeah. Mr. Perlman has with him a copy of the letter that he wrote home a few days after the end of the war. I've read it, and he expresses his reactions at what he had seen the last few weeks of the war when they saw the concentration camp and the survivors, the few survivors, and the bodies that were still there. It's a very realistic expression of what he did see. Mr. Perlman, you also I believe have a map there of...

SP: Not of that, just where our division...

PS: Oh, oh.

SP: It's of the various places that we had been. [unclear]

PS: Yeah. The camp that you saw was, you say southern Bavaria. Was it, it was approaching Austria? Your approach to Austria? Or your approach to...

SP: [unclear]

PS: Yeah.

SP: Well, my, I was part of the 386th Infantry Divi-, Regiment of the 97th Division. We had gotten close to Pilsen in Czechoslovakia and that's when the war ended, and that's where we stopped.

PS: Yeah.

SP: But there were other parts of our division had gone into Austria.

PS: You mentioned in reply to a question I gave you about your own reactions to what you saw. Can you recall the reactions of other men in your unit?

SP: Well, I was close to some of the Jewish young men that were in with me, and they were very much upset, very much upset. And I was too. I couldn't think of anything else for about a week or ten days after that. Of course we were, we had other things to do. We were to keep on going.

PS: About how long did you remain at this location?

SP: At the concentration camp?

PS: Yeah, at the site of the concentration camp.

SP: About a day or something like that.

PS: At that time, Mr. Perlman, were you aware that this was only one of many concentration camps?

SP: No, no.

PS: You never in your wildest dreams imagined that there were as many...

SP: [unclear].

PS: And that the total of twelve million people were, perished in...

SP: No, no.

PS: Has your, has this experience had any influence on your thinking as you look back?

SP: Well, it should never happen again.

PS: Yeah.

SP: Never.

PS: As I say, in your wildest imagination, you could never possibly have realized that the dead that you saw were just a small group of the many millions who were slaughtered.

SP: Yeah.

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

SP: [unclear].

PS: Yeah. This next question may be, did you want to reply to, an explanation that you might have as to why they set up concentration camps?

SP: Well, I personally feel that they wanted to get the undes-, which they claimed, undesirables, out of the way and to bring them into one particular area in a concentration camp and eventually to dispose of them, either through gas or starvation, and hard work.

PS: A personal question. Did your experience have any effect on your faith in your religion?

SP: No I was brought up in an Orthodox home. And my whole life has been centered around like synagogue, religion, and *kashrut* and things like that here.

PS: Yeah.

SP: So it, it's, no.

PS: Do you know if there was any regimental history of, in your outfit that included this experience? None that you know of.

SP: No.

PS: Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of concentration camps?

SP: No, because we were part of the one unit, and we remained part of that. In fact when they brought us back home, they had readied us to go over in the, go towards, into Japan, in that area of the war.

PS: You were being redeployed...

SP: Yeah.

PS: To the Pacific.

SP: Yeah.

PS: When you saw this first concentration camp, you didn't see any, they had no gas chambers at that site. Do you recall when you first heard of the gassing of Jews and prisoners?

SP: Well, when I came back to the United States.

PS: Yeah. Did any of the prisoners there ever contact you or anyone in your unit, do you know?

SP: Well, this one fellow that I know this Israel, he had contact with this man and he brought the families together with...

PS: Yeah.

SP: ...with this man.

PS: Is he local, this man that you mentioned?

SP: No, that's the last I saw of him, but we used to, we'd get together quite often and in fact one fellow that was part of that group lived in Washington and we, after the war we visited one another and I understand that he went on, and he was one of the freedom fighters for Israel, way back then.

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

SP: Well, after the end of the war, oh, about a month, six weeks, something like that.

PS: Then you sailed back to the United States?

SP: Yeah. They brought us back to Le Havre, and they had camps set up there, and they got us ready to go back and we came into the United States in the Boston Harbor, and eventually down to Fort Bragg. And there is when they got us ready to go over to the, whatdyacall...

PS: The Pacific?

SP: The Pacific, but they took us to Camp Lewis, which is on the, in the State of Washington. And there they put us on board ship. And they didn't know what to do with us. And they kept us on that ship over thirty days.

PS: On the ship?

SP: On the ship!

PS: Oh!

SP: Going from place to place. They didn't know what they were gonna do, until they had signed a treaty over there in Japan and our ship came in to Tokyo harbor.

PS: So you actually did complete the journey to Japan.

SP: Yeah, yeah. I was there for a while.

PS: During the period after, at the end of the war, during that period before you sailed out of Le Havre, France...

SP: Yeah?

PS: Did you, during that period did you witness the handling, managing, or distribution of survivors of concentration camps?

SP: No, we didn't see that. The only thing we saw after the war is when the soldiers, the German soldiers gave up. And, in droves they gave up. And then they finally took us out of there and took us to Le Havre and we were in a camp, a field camp set up just temporarily. I think they called it Old Gold. And...

PS: Yeah, there was Lucky Strike...

SP: Yeah.

PS: ...and Old Gold. After you left the concentration camp, the site, and proceeded on your military mission, did you see any other atro-, evidence of atrocities? In advancing through the area did you see survivors wandering around the...

SAMUEL PERLMAN [1-1-8]

SP: See, they took us either back or they, I don't recall exactly if it was then, either by truck or by what they call forty and eights, in boxcars, that you have a little straw on the bottom and they were closed. We couldn't see too much like.

PS: Yeah. One of the final questions, Mr. Perlman, do you think that you would have the same feeling today if you had not been an eyewitness to one of the thousands of atrocities committed by the Nazis against humanity?

SP: The same feelings as I had...

PS: Yeah.

SP: When I saw that?

PS: Mmm.

SP: Well, I would have that if they, if it was non-Jews...

PS: Yeah.

SP: ...that were being persecuted.

PS: Yeah, atrocities against humanity itself.

SP: You know, it was humanity. It was terrible!

PS: And there were six million non-Jews who were victims of...

SP: Yeah, terrible!

PS: ...those atrocities. We have just about reached the end of our interview, Mr. Perlman. Would you like to add anything to your testimony other than replying to the questions that I have asked you? Anything that we missed or any other, anything else to add that would be of interest or...

SP: You know, I thought the world at that time had learned a lesson that there wasn't to be any more bloodshed regardless of who it was. But we haven't. We haven't. And we, all these years, these forty-five years that have passed, these incidents have reoccurred. They reoccurred.

PS: All over the...

SP: In, in...

PS: In every pla-, on every continent on earth.

SP: Yeah. It's terrible that...

PS: Yeah.

SP: ...mankind hasn't really become civilized.

PS: I think it's one of the greatest of frustrations to us, to we who have witnessed the, probably the worst period of genocidal...

SP: Yeah.

PS: That you know, has ever occurred. I know I felt the same way that this was so bad that it could never happen again.

SP: Yeah.

PS: And it's happening all the time.

SP: Sure.

SAMUEL PERLMAN [1-1-9]

PS: Mr. Perlman, on behalf of Gratz College, and the Holocaust Oral History Archive I want to thank you for your very valuable testimony, which will immediately become a part of our permanent Holocaust Archive here at Gratz College, and again, thank you very much.

SP: That's all right.

Note: A copy of the letter written by Samuel Perlman on May 8, 1945 is included with this transcript.

SAMUEL PERLMAN [I-A-10]

Tuesday May 8th 1945

“V-E” Day in Czechoslovakia

Dear Folks:

Received your letter today and as usual was more than glad to hear from you, and that you are feeling fine. I must apologize for not writing any sooner, not even time to drop you a line saying hello.

Today is a beautiful, warm, sunshining day. A day most befitting for “V-E” Day, for it brings hope and peace for a better world to come. Last night the troops on all fronts were told of the great news, that the Germans were laying down their arms in unconditional surrender. That they had enough, and to continue the war further would only be a waste of human lives. Here in our sector of Czechoslovakia troops were giving themselves up in droves yesterday. We captured company after company with all their equipment. Germany is down on its knees--a black day for the Hitlerites, but a clear shiny day for the peace loving people of the world.

I saw a sight eight days ago that I'll never in all my life forget. A sickly, awe inspiring sight that made my skin creep. I hope for your sake and well being that you never have to witness or experience anything like it. I knew after viewing this spectacle what I was really fighting for, and wanted to fight even more. I'll try to relate this incident to you the best I can so here goes:-

This is Flossenburg, Germany--a small town in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps. A place most beautiful, dotted with fresh smelling Evergreen trees. Like giant Christmas trees in all their beauty, but alas, not in all their holiness. For here in this paradise lies Schutzhaftlager, one of the largest and cruelest concentration camps in all Germany. Here in this unholiness were housed 16,000 unfortunate souls living and hoping to die so that they might be spared all this unhuman suffering. They were called political prisoners, because they didn't see eye to eye with the Nazi overlords. They were put here to get them out of the way, so that they might not interfere with the corrupt plans of Hitler. Here in civilized Germany there isn't any Bill of Rights. You just believe what Herr Hitler wants you to believe, nothing more. For thinking and believing in the rights of man, these unfortunate souls were put into this camp to “sweat” out a slow and miserable death.

Schutzhaftlager originally was build through the sweat and toil of these prisoners to house around 1600 people, but due to the Gestapo tagging every non-Aryan a political undesirable the total swelled to 16,000 prisoners. This camp was run by the infamous SS troops, with members of the regular army to carry out their dirty work. This they did to perfection, for when the American troops finally got there, the amount of men left in the camp totaled around 1400. The first two years were the worse, for the SS troops worked the prisoners 16 and 20 hours a day with little time in between left for rest. Their food

rations for a day consisted of one slice of brown bread and a bowl of soup made from potato peelings. On these meager rations they had to toil and sweat all day in a stone quarry not far from the camp. They slept in cold, lice eaten barracks, with scarcely enough clothing on their backs to keep them from freezing. The stench and lice in these barracks was enough to drive a man crazy, but here in this filth they rested their weary bones hoping that they might die and end all their misery. The SS troops were merciless, often beating the prisoners into unconsciousness and death. They have been known to have ordered women and children to lie down on the ground, and with their boots stamped them unto death. All this is not a gross exaggeration, for I've spoken to the prisoners myself, and from what I've seen I know this to be the actual truth. There were Czechs, Jews, Poles, Russian, and German in this camp, all being treated in this unhuman manner.

When a prisoner got too sick to work anymore, he was put into the hospital ward to lay an await death. The biggest toll of death came from typhus and malnutrition. Death at Schutzhaftlager wasn't an uncommon thing, for they were dying at the rate of 75 and 100 people a day. A man weighing around 150 lbs when entering this camp, at the time of his death was down to around 40 lbs. Disposing of the bodies was becoming quite a problem so they installed a large crematory to burn up the bodies. I visited this crematory at the foot of a hill and found over a hundred bodies heaped in a pile as if they were but a stack of wood. From observation I could see that they had died from malnutrition, for their bodies were but a skeleton covered by a layer of waxy looking skin. It was a ghastly sight to see. The stench was terrific, too strong for me to remain there for any length of time. I left the place in a hurry, almost vomiting on the way out. Before leaving I viewed the large oven with its tray used to cremate these unfortunate souls. There were human bones still laying on the grates of the oven that didn't decompose, and probably would have to be removed and buried. It's a sight I'll never forget, one that makes my blood boil seeking revenge. I can still smell the stench of the crematory.

As soon as the American soldiers took over the camp, they started, with the help of those inmates strong enough, to give assistance to clean up the camp and bring livable conditions to those unfortunate souls. The burned beds, clothing, and other lice infested things. They were issued new clothing, medical attention was brought in, and for the first time in five years were given decent food to eat. They were able to help some of the prisoners, but those confined to the hospital wards were too far gone to be moved or saved. They were just laying there awaiting death. Freedom had come a little too late for them, but even in death they were happy to know that they were dying free men.

I spoke to a little Jewish boy eight years old. Four of the eight years he had spent a prisoner at Schutzhaftlager. His only crime was that he was a Jew, an undesirable. His parents were killed here and now he is left alone to face the world with a bitterness that only time can erase. I sure hope there'll be a silver lining to his future, one that will prove to him that life is really worthwhile, that his suffering was not in vain. So you see, this is

SAMUEL PERLMAN [I-A-12]

Germany, intellectual Germany advance in all the sciences, but at heart just mere murderers.

In this day of triumph, "V-E" Day, God has proven that the righteous shall conquer all.

Well folks, this will be about all for now. Stay well and write very often. I remain as always,

Love,
Sam