

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MILTON PINCUS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: March 6, 1991

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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MP - Milton Pincus [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: March 6, 1991

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing Mr. Milton Pincus, for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is March 6, 1991. Mr. Pincus served in the United States Army during World War II. Mr. Pincus, 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?

MP: I was serving with the Military Government Unit. It was I-13-G-3. And we were a unit that had no particular place to go at the time. We were originally scheduled to go to Friedrichshafen, but after negotiating, renegotiating territories, Friedrichshafen was given over to the French. And we were just a unit that roamed and were called into places that were taken when the unit that was supposed to be there was not available.

PS: Yeah. That was, you landed in France?

MP: After D-Day.

PS: Oh, it was after...

MP: After D-Day.

PS: Yeah. And then you proceeded through France. Before, in your advance through France, prior to reaching Germany, did you see anything at all of, any evidence of Nazi atrocities against French civilians, or against prisoners? Any evidence at all of...

MP: Well, the only evidence that I had, I had an address from an aunt of mine, that had family in Paris. When I got to the address, the neighbors told me that they had been taken away by the Nazis. That was the only indication I had other than, you know, people mentioning the fact that people were being taken by the Nazis.

PS: So, then you did enter Germany. Before you entered Germany, did you, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews in Europe?

MP: Yes, because information starting at, in the form of rumor, I don't think anybody had really seen it at that particular time, but there was a lot of talk about what had been going on in the concentration camps.

PS: Did you really realize that there were the gas chambers, the mass extermination? Did you realize that it was on as...

MP: Oh, I always...

PS: ...tremendous a scale as it was?

MP: I always felt that where there was smoke there was fire, although I could not be 100 percent sure. I did in my deepest reaches of my mind think that perhaps something was going on, but to what extent I had no idea at the time.

PS: You knew for instance that thousands or possibly hundreds of thousands of people, Jews and non-Jews, were being taken from their homes and shoved into boxcars and being hauled off to destinations who knew? Had you seen, prior to your advance into the area where you came upon the concentration camp, had you seen any displaced persons, any liberated prisoners of war?

MP: No.

PS: No, I was wondering if you saw any that might have, you know, where the physical condition might have given you some indication of how the Germans, how the Nazis were treating their prisoners, whether it be POWs or displaced persons and oth-...

MP: See, I was not in a combat unit, and I had no occasion to be in places where POWs were kept.

PS: Oh, I see.

MP: And things of that nature. As I stated, I was with the Military Government Unit.

PS: Now, after a number of weeks, months, you did arrive at the site of a concentration camp. Can you give the name of the camp that you were involved in liberating, and its location?

MP: Dachau.

PS: Dachau.

MP: Outside of Munich.

PS: Right. And the approximate date?

MP: The approximate date was either April 30th or May 1st, somewhere in that particular area in 1945.¹

PS: Did you think later, after all, the official surrender date of all the German armed forces was May the 8th. And here, it wasn't until one, actually one week before the entire German surrender that one of the major camps like Dachau was liberated. Milt, you entered Dachau, then, just shortly after the first of the liberating troops, is that correct?

MP: No, I went in at the same time.

PS: Oh, at the same time.

MP: At the same time.

PS: Yeah.

MP: We were right with them when they went in, and the morning after that, the officer in charge of a detachment broke up our detachment, and I was sent out to the camp with half of our oh, it must have been three hundred fellows. And at that particular point I was in charge of the administration end of the camp. We closed the camp because of the threat of typhus, and no one was able to go in the camp. Because, we were dusted every time we went in and out, with powder, to protect us against the typhus.

PS: Right.

¹ The first American troops entered Dachau on April 29, 1945.

MP: So I saw the camp just as it was left by the Germans.

PS: Now, to the best of your memory, you just said that you saw it exactly as the fleeing guards--incidentally, were there any guards still up there when you arrived?

MP: There were, evidently because from the first day we got in there, as I said we got in a day, when, after dawn, the day was taken, there was murder going on. Inmates had picked out informants. They picked out guards who...

PS: Yeah.

MP: ...were hiding amongst them, and killing them. There was one big group in a large circle, kicked, I saw them kick two of them to death. Another one of our soldiers got into trouble because his rifle was taken by an ex-prisoner and used to shoot to death someone else. And...

PS: These were, as far as you know, these were mostly uniformed German guards?

MP: You couldn't tell, because many of them had discarded their uniforms and they were...

PS: Yeah.

MP: ...picked out, rightly so or not, I would never, I will never know...

PS: Yeah.

MP: ...by inmates.

PS: How about the *Kapos*? Do you know anything about how the prisoners reacted upon liberation toward the, toward their own, you know, toward the...

MP: Well all the...

PS: ...inmates who had...

MP: I would imagine that some of those that they took, they vented their anger on were *Kapos* that had mistreated them, etc.

PS: Yeah.

MP: I would imagine so. I have no definite proof...

PS: Yeah, I would think too.

MP: ...of that, yeah.

PS: The saying that there were good and there was bad.

MP: Right.

PS: In fact, I heard one case when an actual German guard was saved by the prisoners because he happened to be compassionate. He had, you know, he had good relations with a few of the prisoners in helping them...

MP: Right.

PS: Giving them a little extra food. Now, can you to the best of your memory, describe exactly what you saw when your first visions upon entering the prison camp?

MP: Well, the first inkling I had of what had been going on was, before we got to the camp, because on the railroad sidings leading to the camp there were railroad cars of every description--boxcars, hoppers, gondolas, etc., that were filled with bodies. In fact, I

had taken some photos with a very poor camera that I had and you can just about distinguish what they were. When we got to the camp, of course, we saw the famous *Arbeit Macht Frei* over the gate, and all over, all...

PS: Which translates to...

MP: Wor...

PS: ...Work Makes Free.

MP: Work Makes Freedom. Work Makes Freedom. And all over there was death, death. There were mountains of corpses piled, fifteen, twenty foot high.

PS: When you say mounds...

MP: Just piles.

PS: Unburied. Just...

MP: Unburied. They hadn't, they didn't have time to dispose...

PS: Yeah.

MP: Dispose. The crematoriums themselves were full. They just had no time to dispose of all the bodies at that particular time. And we also found that amongst the living were what I, unfortunately call the living dead. The people were...

PS: Yeah.

MP: So emaciated. I'm sure you've seen pictures of them, thanking us for liberating them. And we knew well, full well that many of them would not survive.

PS: Yeah, I was just gonna ask you...

MP: Right.

PS: If you thought that many of them were too far gone to survive.

MP: Well, just by looking at them, they looked too far gone to be survived, and of course, I imagine some of our soldiers in their want to help these people just gave them things to eat that they should have never given them that particular time...

PS: Yeah.

MP: Because their bodies would not absorb it.

PS: Yeah.

MP: And it would do more damage than good.

PS: Yeah, some actually died as a result.

MP: Died becau-, yeah, because of...

PS: They were so far gone that there was so little left of their digestive systems...

MP: Right.

PS: That they couldn't...

MP: Couldn't...

PS: Take the kind, now we had no food to offer which we felt so bad about.

MP: Yeah.

PS: That here were starving people and we had nothing to offer them. Yet we heard later that had we done so, we probably would have done more harm than good.

MP: True.

PS: And yet, in all the months, we weren't told that. Concentration camps had been liberated on the eastern front.

MP: Right.

PS: The Russians and the Soviets had found this out and yet the, even doctors told me that they didn't realize how far gone the digestive systems were. So you gave a, certainly a fine description of what you saw. Is there anything else that, for instance, did you see any children?

MP: No, noth-, no children in the camps.

PS: Among the dead or living?

MP: Not, I didn't.

PS: Did you see any women?

MP: Yes. Yes. There, the men and women there were mixed as the, their bodies were just mixed. They were thrown into piles. In fact, we had a mass burial. We had to mass bury them. We just couldn't handle it any other way.

PS: Can you estimate how many living prisoners you saw? How many survivors?

MP: Well, actually, if I am, if I recall correctly, there were supposed to have been about 32,000 in the camp still. Many of them looked in excellent shape, because many of them had been, were in work forces that worked for farmers and manufacturing plants in the surrounding areas, and they were fairly well-fed.

PS: They probably went out each day and were brought back in the...

MP: Right.

PS: As you say they might have been doing vital work that, where the Germans were anxious to keep them alive. I guess the, as far as the dead, would there be anything, is there any way you could give an estimate of those that you saw, about how many...

MP: Not really. Not really. But there must have been thousands of them.

PS: Did you see, actually the ovens? Gas chambers?

MP: Oh yes. Oh yes. Yes, in fact the gas chamber was titled *Brause Bad* which means shower bath.

PS: Yeah.

MP: And they, as you well know they were, they put, they, they were, the prisoners were sent into these so-called shower baths thinking they were going to have a bath or a shower. And they were just killed by the Zyklon Z [He means "B"].

PS: And you also saw the crematorium.

MP: Yes, yes, yes.

PS: Many have said that when they got there the ovens were still hot and still glowing.

MP: No. Not in Dachau. They were not hot. Evidently they had been used in these last few days just to get out as fast as they could.

PS: Yeah.

MP: To escape the troops coming in and the wrath of the prisoners, had they been liberated.

PS: Do you have reason to believe, or did you think at the time that the, oh, the ratio of Jews, if most of the bodies and most of the survivors you saw were Jewish? Did you have any...

MP: I had no...

PS: Any thoughts as to...

MP: I had no indication of that, but I'm sure that the Germans who had, were good at record keeping, I'm sure that the records might...

PS: Yeah.

MP: Would have shown...

PS: Oh, there would be...

MP: Just what...

PS: There would be...

MP: Right.

PS: There would be...

MP: What...

PS: I asked you the, you did s-, you did not see any children.

MP: I don't remember seeing any children.

PS: Yeah. Were you assigned any responsibilities in arranging for the care of prisoners?

MP: No.

PS: Were you assigned any responsibilities for transfer or handling of prisoners?

MP: No. Our main responsibility was to see that the camp was closed to visitors and to gather whatever information we could as, that were in the offices and hand them over to the other civil authorities that were responsible for these things.

PS: Can you describe the reaction of the prisoners, the survivors, as you entered, when they saw that those coming in were liberators, that you were Americans there to liberate them?

MP: Well, there was great joy, and the one thing I recollect in going through the barracks, in fact, the first barracks I went through, there was one of these prisoners who was so far gone, was on his knees, kissed my hand, and said, "Thank you, our liberator." And that of course has always remained with me, because it was a reaction I'm sure that most of the survivors had at that particular time, after having suffered what they had.

PS: Were you able to communicate verbally with many of those prisoners?

MP: I was able to communicate verbally with a few of them because I did speak German and my job was interpreter with the military government. And, really, you didn't have to ask them what happened. It was visual. You could see the condition of these people. You knew that they had to, they had to have suffered and been mistreated and undernourished. This was quite obvious.

PS: Your position you just mentioned. Your job or position or one of your jobs was as an interpreter. Were you assigned there in Dachau to do any communicating with the prisoners as an interpreter?

MP: Well, as I explained earlier, we were not supposed to be in Dachau. We were there simply because it was...

PS: Yeah.

MP: ...circumstances. And we were only there a few days when the detachment that was responsible had all the information and all the assignments came and took over. Then we were on our way to another assignment.

PS: When you entered Dachau, your unit was, had no food or medical equipment to treat the survivors?

MP: We had none of this. We were only a small detachment of seven enlisted men and three officers.

PS: Oh, oh, yeah.

MP: And we had no equipment. In fact for our own food, we had to find a headquarters and pick up our food as we traveled.

PS: To your knowledge, the other units that were arriving, combat units that came in, do you know if they came prepared to treat medically or feed survivors?

MP: All I can say is I know that there was different units that were trained in different aspects of helping these people when, if and when these concentration camps were liberated. And I imagine these units came in and took up their duties as they were supposed to.

PS: Did the experience of seeing the prisoners have any effect on your personal feeling about being a part of the war and fighting Germany? If you had not been an eyewitness to these atrocities, do you think you would have felt the same about fighting the war?

MP: Well, having been an eyewitness to these atrocities made me feel more bitter.

PS: Yeah.

MP: People. But when you get things second hand, it's a little bit more difficult to feel. And now, this is why I feel like what we're doing now, and relating our personal experiences to others who have not had that experience, I will perpetuate the memory of these things and perhaps see that it doesn't happen again.

PS: Well, now the reason I'm doing this as a volunteer, interviewing liberators such as you, and I'm sure the liberators such as you, and of which I am one, are doing this also because at this point there are maybe say a half a million eye witnesses to the Holocaust, counting the witnesses of the soldiers, liberators such as us, and many, many survivors--thousands and thousands of survivors who are still living. And yet, even knowing that there are hundreds of thousands of eye witnesses to all of this, there are still, you know, radicals, organizations, neo-Nazi organizations, skinheads, who even with all,

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knowing that there are thousands or hundreds of thousands of witnesses still have the guts to claim that it never happened. And I know the way you, I feel and probably you feel is that if they have the guts to do this while there are still many, many thousands of us who saw it, what is gonna happen when we're all gone and there are no eye witnesses. So that is why you and I and perhaps College Holocaust Archives have, are doing this, to establish for history. Now one copy of your tape, the tape of this interview, will go into a bank vault with hundreds and hundreds of others, to be preserved for future historians, and to have some share in future history, be it a hundred years or five hundred years, to prove its own evidence, a testimony, to the realities, you know, of the Holocaust. There is a little bit more, Milt, that I'd like to ask you. Did, would you say that the other men in your unit reacted pretty much the same as you did?

MP: I would say that also, doesn't matter what their faith was, whatever the color, their creed, all reacted pretty much the same. They could not believe what they saw.

PS: Now, how many do, how long did you remain, you mentioned that you couldn't stay within Dachau. But, did you remain in the vicinity with any duties connected with the camp?

MP: No. No. We eventually got to a place that was our own, where we stayed until I was discharged.

PS: Yeah. Which was where?

MP: That was in a place called Pforzheim [16 miles SE of Karlsruhe] in the, let's see that's in, would be in the eastern part of Germany, directly below Baden-Baden, which is a well-known...

PS: Yeah. That would be oh, south of Munich toward...

MP: No, it would be in Karlsruhe. That would be in Karlsruhe, Landkreis [province], between Karlsruhe and Stuttgart.

PS: Oh, that would have been north...

MP: Yeah.

PS: North then of...

MP: Yeah, right.

PS: When you saw, Milt, when you saw Dachau, saw the enormity of the all but unbelievable atrocities that occurred there, did you in your wildest dreams at that time imagine that this was only one of many, many concentration camps, some of which, such as Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau, were set up even more so as death, extermination camps?

MP: You know, I'm surprised even to this day that sometimes I read or see or having gone to the memorial in Miami, camps that I don't recall even having heard of before.

PS: Yeah. I know, my experience in Landsberg, when I, people ask me what camp and I say, "Landsberg," most people don't know. And yet, Landsberg there were 11 units there. They were building big, an underground factory to manufacture Messerschmidt

jet planes. It was there that Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. There were so many that, I think, the names of 90 percent would be unknown names to most people.

MP: Exactly, because most of the publicity went to Auschwitz and Dachau. From what I understand, Dachau was not the worst of the camps.

PS: No, no. I don't think Dachau was actually set up as an extermination camp. They...

MP: They changed it later.

PS: It became that because I guess due to the treatment of prisoners...

MP: No...

PS: So many were...

MP: What happened, why there was such a preponderance of people in Dachau in this time is that they were fleeing the Russians, and they were coming in and...

PS: Oh, yeah.

MP: ...shipping everybody away from the east. And this is why they were so, this is why they got caught up with so much, so many prisoners.

PS: That's right. Because I think the Russians started to encroach on the area in Poland, the concentration camps all the way back, I think mostly it was around January and February.

MP: Right.

PS: So you're right, Milt, that they were...

MP: See, they were push-...

PS: Shipping...

MP: They were shipping them...

PS: To the west.

MP: To, they were shipping them to the west.

PS: So you saw a good portion of, a bad portion of the many millions who were slaughtered during that period. In your own mind, can you explain to any degree German decisions that led up to the, led to the setting up of concentration camps?

MP: I'm sorry, could you repeat that again?

PS: Yeah. In your own mind, can you in any way, think of what was the reason, the German decisions of setting up, the German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

MP: Well, of course the policy was to get rid of all undesirables, be they Jews, Gypsies, Catholics, whatever. And how would they, how could they get rid of them? My feeling has always been if there were blacks in Germany, they would have been the victim and fortunate for the blacks there were very few blacks if any in Germany. So the Jews as a minority were the ones that they picked out. And of course historically Jews have been picked on because they've been minorities...

PS: Yeah.

MP: ...through the ages.

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PS: Do you know, Milt, if there were any official records in your unit of the experience of your people at Dachau? In other words in your, say the daily record of activities.

MP: Well, I would imagine that each unit kept a record of their daily activities. I had no responsibility for that, and I'm sure that someplace in the Archives of the U.S. Military Government there would be records regarding detachment I-13-G-3.

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

MP: Well, strictly from what date? I was discharged the last day of December, in 1945. So I remained in Europe roughly, the war ended in May, another seven, eight months.

PS: During that period, Milt, did you witness the handling agencies that were coming in to handle and to reassign and distribute the survivors? In other words all those displaced...

MP: I had nothing to do with that, because from that point on we eventually got to the place that we, that was open for us Pforzheimers as I mentioned earlier. And there it was simply a question of keeping the civilian population out of the hair of the military and getting things started all over again so that things could start to go normally. You know what amazed me, though. I had an experience in Pforzheim where a survivor returned home. Now this survivor was the epitome of what the Germans were trying to get rid of. The man came back, he had been the jeweler in this particular town. He came back, his business was still running. He got his business back. But what surprised me more than anything, this man was Jewish, and he was a hunchback. And he survived, simply because of his trade. He was able to repair watches for them, and do all the little intricate things that jewelers can do on small instruments. He survived. And another interesting fact about him, this man had relatives that I knew, who lived on my street in Brooklyn. And I, they contacted him through me. So, what was this whole business of getting rid of people? If it suited them, they did not get rid of them. I mean there's, of course these were individuals [unclear].

PS: He probably would have been programmed for extermination at a later date.

MP: Oh, I would guess so.

PS: When they no longer needed him. Now, you were in Germany. Your experience at Dachau was the very end of April. So you were in Germany a number of months. Not in that particular area of Dachau. But during the months that you remained in Germany, between the end of the war and your being shipped home, did you see anything that you would want to speak about? That is, in the relationship between returning survivors and the community? That is, those who returned to their home town.

MP: Well...

PS: Did you see anything of a relationship between them and their--the non-Jewish community?

MP: Well...

PS: Were they received or were...

MP: I explained, I told you about this one incident with this jeweler that returned. And he seemed to be welcomed home. I had one other incident with a young Jewish girl that returned, and she came to see a friend of hers, a German girl, and they embraced like long lost sisters. So, I'm sure that on a one-to-one basis in many cases there was a feeling of the love and respect that they had for each other before this whole thing started. But this was individual. You had a nation that was determined because of their own needs, to achieve what they wanted through any means. And as a result we had concentration camps and people being systematically killed, being used for their, for whatever purposes the Germans decided to use them for, for their benefit. In Dachau, I had the occasion to take a group of German citizens from the city through the camp. This was just a day or two after the camp was liberated, and of course there wasn't much chance to clean it up. We were doing the best we could at the time. And, they were horrified by what they had seen. They were crying, and lamenting, claiming they didn't know it was going on. Well, I still say that where this thing had existed for X amount of years right outside a city, and the guards lived in the city or close by...

PS: Yeah.

MP: These people must have some inkling of what was going on.

PS: Sure. There was daily communication with...

MP: Daily communication.

PS: With their own people who were working within...

MP: And I also feel that some of these guards were not of such strong character that they could stand the type of work they were doing on a daily basis, and somewhere, somehow they must have let out what was going on.

PS: And also when the wind blew from that direction...

MP: Right.

PS: I'm sure that the odors on the breezes...

MP: No doubt...

PS: ...told them the story.

MP: No doubt about it.

PS: You would say that the, you saw possibly only a few cases where returnees came back to their place of origin, and you mentioned, what, two cases. Were there, of the examples you saw, you would say that they were friendly and did you see any hostility?

MP: I saw no hostility. I had a very limited experience in this result that it would have seemed to me that most of the Jews that lived in Germany must have lived in the large cities. I was not in a large city.

PS: Yeah. That's probably very true.

MP: I was in a suburban area, small town, maybe 20 to 25,000 at the time, and I don't think there would have been many Jews returning there.

PS: Now you mentioned, Milt, we're getting to just about the end but there are just a few questions in my mind. You mentioned the earlier part of this interview that you spoke German, and that you were, one of your duties was to act as an interpreter. Now during the period after the war, in those months, speaking German as you did, you probably had much more vocal communication with the people than other American soldiers. Is there any thing you sensed or anything that you learned in conversations with the Germans of how they felt? But of course at that time they all felt...

MP: Felt what?

PS: Yes, you know, none of them...

MP: None of them knew, none of them knew...

PS: Yeah.

MP: None, if they knew, they wouldn't have done anything about it...

PS: Yeah.

MP: Because they had to, because it was the government doing it and if they tried to help, they would be in trouble. This was...

PS: Yeah.

MP: This was their focal point and we keep hearing it today, the same thing.

PS: Yeah. Did you hear any animosity toward the Americans or towards the Allied countries that defeated Germany? Did you, by animosity, were there any who argued with you that the German system, that Hitler was right, and you heard nothing. Of course if someone felt that way I'm sure they wouldn't have...

MP: I'm sure they wouldn't have expressed it to me.

PS: Spoken it to an American soldier. Do you, since you returned home and it's now 46, coming up on 46 years, when you think about it, does it still stir up emotional...

MP: Without...

PS: Emotions?

MP: Without a doubt. The first time several years ago I spoke to our congregation regarding, this was after the Holocaust Commission was started, and the focal point was to get people to talk about their experiences. Well, this was the first time I had spoken, and I just, after a few minutes I choked up. My throat just would not, I couldn't speak. I had to drink water to get started again. And even now I get the feeling of...

PS: Yeah.

MP: Bringing back memories.

PS: So, you feel probably the same as I, that those feelings could never be...

MP: Never.

PS: Laid to rest. And they shouldn't be.

MP: Never.

PS: They never should be forgotten. Milt, is there anything, we've covered a broad area and I thank you very much. Is there anything that you would like to add to...

MP: Yes.

PS: ...your testimony?

MP: I would like to add the fact that about three years ago, the wife and I took a trip through Europe, a few countries in Europe. And Germany was one of them. When we got to Munich, I was surprised. All I, the only indication I saw about Dachau was a little maybe eight or ten inch sign, about two inches high, with an arrow pointing to Dachau. Well of course, I wanted to get back to see Dachau. Well, as you can expect, it's been, it's cleaned up. They had one or two barracks standing, which are absolutely clean. They had a few of the ovens standing. But everything was [unclear]. But what surprised me more than anything else was the amount of visitors at that particular point--people that were interested, were going through the exhibits, and their comments, that, you know. And these were all new generation people. They couldn't believe that all of this had happened. So there is some interest, even though the fact that it's not publicized in Germany.

PS: We are, those connected with our program at Gratz College, are getting many, many requests and especially from non-Jewish schools, colleges, high schools, for speakers on Holocaust awareness. Milt, on behalf of Gratz College and our Holocaust Oral History Archive I want to thank you very, very much. Your tape, incidentally, will become, the tape of this interview, that is, will become a part of our Archives at Gratz, and in the future will help to bear testimony to the realities. So thank you very, very much.

MP: Well, you're quite welcome, Phil.