HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

DR. NORMAN G. SCHNEEBERG

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: October 12, 1989

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NS - Dr. Norman G. Schneeberg[1] [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: October 12, 1989

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing Dr. Norman Schneeberg for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is October 12, 1989. Dr. Schneeberg, can you please tell me where in Europe you served prior to being assigned to one of the concentration camps?

NS: In Europe? I was with the 6th Armoured Division. We were in southern Germany near Weimar where the headquarters of the 6th Armoured Division was. And Buchenwald was within about ten miles of that headquarters.

PS: Prior to that had you been in other service within Europe?

NS: No.

PS: England?

NS: I was transferred from England, well, England...

PS: Yeah.

NS: ...is part of Europe of course, yeah. I was transferred from England about March, 1945.

PS: How long a period did you serve in England before being assigned to the continent?

NS: It was a little over a year.

PS: During that period, were you at all aware of the Nazi atrocities, death camps, gassing, the ovens? Had you heard anything at all?

NS: No. As I recall, nothing.

PS: You were not aware of...

NS: Well...

PS: What was going on within...

NS: I had heard in the 1930s I--there was a paperback book publication describing concentration camps. And nothing about killing, gassing, torture.

PS: But you in no way realized what was going on right at that time within Germany?

NS: No. [tape off then on]

PS: Also during the same period, did you meet--that is the same period in England--did you meet or treat any individuals who were victims of Nazi atrocities?

NS: No.

[1]Dr. Schneeberg was a medical doctor during the time of his serving in WWII.

PS: Do you recall the date that you, the approximate date that you arrived at the concentration camp--that is, at Buchenwald–at the concentration camp, and identify the camp.

NS: It must have been, well, the camp was Buchenwald. It must have been early in April, but I can't recall that [unclear].

PS: I believe the liberation of Buchenwald was somewhere around the middle, I think around the 20th, April 20th or thereabouts.

NS: Oh, then I got there about two weeks after that.

PS: Yeah. I think, let's see, the German surrender I believe was May the 8th or May 9th...

NS: May 8th.

PS: May 8th.

NS: May 8th was D-Day, eh, Vic-, V-Day.

PS: Yeah.

NS: And I guess it was April 20th.

PS: Can you please describe, when you arrived at Buchenwald, can you please describe what you saw and what your feelings were at the time?

NS: Well, there were masses of survivors, dressed in, many of them in the striped uniforms that the people in the concentration camps wore. They were thin. Some of them were dressed in--clothing, as in that picture I had showed you. They were very thin. Some of them were skeletal appearing. None of them smiled. They had a rather black face. They were a very sad looking group of men. There were no women at all, only men that we saw.

PS: Were there any children?

NS: No children.

PS: No children.

NS: No.

PS: Other things that you saw there that you observed?

NS: Well, there were the bunks in the buildings, and in many of these bunks there were survivors, people who were dying of typhus, tuberculosis, had not been transferred to hospitals yet. And they were skeletal, victims of severe malnutrition, extremely pale. They were end stage diseased. And most of them had, before I arrived, had been transferred out, presumably to hospitals. But there were about twenty or thirty men still in these bunks.

PS: That's all, just...

NS: Yeah, just a very small amount.

PS: Had any hospital facilities been established there at Buchenwald?

NS: Not in Buchenwald as far as I know. I couldn't see any.

PS: Were there any survivors still there who were in what you would describe as reasonably healthy, mobile?

NS: I don't remember anybody who really looked well-nourished and healthy. They were all quite thin.

PS: You would say that the survivors that you saw and examined were suffering from severe and extreme malnutrition? Evidence of disease? Evidence of bruises from brutality?

NS: Bruises I didn't see. Remember that I got there about two weeks after liberation. They had been fed during those two weeks. So I'm sure their nutrition had improved compared to what it probably was like when they were first liberated.

PS: You say there were just, what, about twenty or thirty...

NS: In...

PS: In Buchenwald.

NS: Ill. There were, no, no...

PS: Oh, oh.

NS: There were about twenty or thirty ill in the bunks, in the...

PS: Yes.

NS: ...in the buildings. There were masses of men. There must have...

PS: Oh, oh.

NS: ...been a hundred or two hundred men milling around outside.

PS: Do you have any idea how many of the extremely ill had been transferred, had already been transferred when you arrived there?

NS: I don't know. I under-, I had been told by other members of the division who had liberated it that there were thousands of bodies, piled up, that the Germans had left when the first reconnaissance units of the 6th Armoured Division arrived.

PS: Is there any way that you can estimate the ratio of Jewish patients to the total of survivors? Of course when you observed there were only the few...

NS: First of all, I don't remember seeing anybody with a Jewish star on. Whether they had taken them off...

PS: I see.

NS: ...as soon as they were liberated, but I don't recall anybody with a Jewish star. I could not communicate with them. I didn't speak--a lot of them were Poles, a lot of them were Russians. We had a language problem.

PS: Yeah.

NS: Not one guy was, that I met spoke...

PS: Could...

NS: ...decent English. So...

PS: Yeah, my next question, I was going to ask you if you were able to communicate verbally. And I was gonna ask you also with those, with whom you could communicate, that what they described as their experiences at Buchenwald at the hands of the camp guards, that then you had no [unclear], no...

NS: I had no real...

PS: No verbal communication.

NS: Yeah, only from what I saw and but no ability to question them, to...

PS: Without being able to communicate verbally, could you give any description of their psychological condition?

NS: Well, they looked depressed. There wasn't a single one that smiled, or manifested any joy at seeing us, for example. They were just a very sad, depressed group of men.

PS: Dr. Schneeberg, at this point you were describing a few things from your photograph album. Would you care to read the, a sign that...

NS: Yeah.

PS: ...you observed that you have the picture...

NS: Let's turn it off.

PS: Yeah. [tape off then on]

NS: Signs like the one I'm about to read were plastered on the walls of several of the bunks. This one read: "800 men were living in this hospital barrack. 40 to 60 men died each day. We were fighting day and night against typhus, open tuberculosis *Ruhr* [dysentery]," they have R-U-H-R; I don't know what that is, "edema, kekeksia [phonetic], any paresis, paralysis and other charming maladies."

PS: How many per day was that?

NS: It said 40 to 60 men died each day in this hospital.

PS: There were just, oh...

NS: This is a hospital barrack.

PS: Yeah. Just one...

NS: Where there were survivors, twenty to thirty survivors still there.

PS: When you arrived, was the supply of medical equipment, medicines and food adequate at that time, would you say?

NS: Yeah. I would say that what I saw was quite adequate.

PS: Do you have any idea of the survival rate of those who were being treated?

NS: No, because I only visited Buchenwald approximately three times over that period of time that I was there. And I recall that on my third visit about half of the people in those bunks had been taken out. Now whether any of them had died or not, I'm not sure.

PS: Did the experience of seeing these prisoners and also the other horrible sights you saw at Buchenwald, did those sights have any effect on your feeling about having been a part of the war against Germany, either in England or in Germany itself?

NS: Well, you know, it was a war that had to be fought and we were all eager to get it over with. And we all felt that it was absolutely essential to destroy Hitler and the Hitler philosophy. And it was a--we all felt very sad that these camps had not been liberated sooner so that there had been, could have been more survivors.

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

NS: I had heard that there were many at that time, but I don't remember...

PS: Again, in your wildest imagination, could you have estimated at that time that there had been a total of roughly eleven or twelve million people murdered of whom six million were Jewish prisoners?

NS: No, I had no idea.

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

NS: Well the original concentration camps were really for political prisoners. And then they started taking Jews. Then during the war, prisoners of war were put in concentration camps, many of them. There were a lot of Russian prisoners of war. I was told. I didn't see any there because they had been liberated. There were Jews. There were citizens, Polish citizens who were gathered, you know, or captured, and thrown into the concentration camps willy nilly. That's really all I can tell you about it.

PS: During that period of time that you were at Buchenwald and the general area, Weimar, did you have any contact at all with German civilians, any communication at all with the Germans?

NS: Yeah. Yeah they, we met Germans, because we were stationed in a village. We lived in an abandoned house, slept on the floor in our sleeping bags. The Germans were very obsequious, very friendly. They wanted to give us gifts. They wanted to give us binoculars and cameras, whatever they had that hadn't been picked up already. And we were told of course that we were not to fraternize with the Germans at all. But we talked to them. Some of them could speak English. Some of them couldn't.

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

NS: Let's see. I would say, April, May, June, about two months, two, two-and-a-half months.

PS: Going back just with one question, to Buchenwald. Were there, when you arrived any prison guards? Any Germans still...

NS: No.

PS: ...remaining?

NS: None at all.

PS: Have any of the patients that you treated at Buchenwald ever contacted you later in life, or any that you've met?

NS: Not a prisoner, a German wrote me a letter, and I don't know how he acquired my name, and was writing a long dissertation to me, absolving the German people of whatever guilt, and particularly himself. I have no idea whether he found my name in that village as a member of the armed services. But I do recall that there was no other attempt to communicate.

PS: You don't remember him as an individual...

NS: I never saw him, no...

PS: Going back...

NS: I don't remember him as anybody I met.

PS: Do you think that your feelings would have been the same had you not been an eye witness to the Nazi atrocities? Having been an eye witness, has that, do you think, strengthened your awareness of the entire picture of the war and the unfortunate...

NS: Well, to a certain extent, but I think I was pretty aware of what the war represented, and the war against Fascism was extremely important for the survival of all of us, especially Jews.

PS: I believe that I have asked the questions that were in my mind, Dr. Schneeberg. Do you have anything that you'd like to add to your testimony?

NS: Well...

PS: Any thoughts? Feelings? Or...

NS: You know, I saw the whole camp. We saw the ovens. And when I saw the gas ovens I really couldn't believe what I was seeing. Really, I, no matter how often it's described or discussed, when you see it right there in front of you and you realize that thousands and thousands of people went through these ovens--and some of them were half alive I understand when they were shoved into the ovens--it's just an unbelievable story.

PS: And I don't think that Buchenwald was really even one of the death camps. Of course they did have the...

NS: Well, they had ovens.

PS: Well, I mean on the scale of...

NS: Yeah.

PS: Treblinka or Auschwitz, Buchenwald was...

NS: Maybe not, no. I don't think it was as large a camp. And if you...

PS: What I mean is that with all you saw there, there were others that were on a much larger, a mass, really a mass, it's terrible to use the term but like mass production, or I guess it'd be better to say mass destruction.

NS: Auschwitz, I understand, was a very big camp.

PS: Well of course that was set up for mass extermination, although I hate to use the word extermination.

NS: It was called the Final Solution.

PS: The Final Solution. Dr. Schneeberg, I want to thank you for your very meaningful testimony, which will immediately become a part of the permanent testimony within the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive, and on behalf of our department there, I want to thank you very, very much.

NS: I appreciate the ability to help in whatever little way I was able to.

PS: Thank you.