

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JOSEPH DONSKY

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: April 4, 1989

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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JD - Joseph Donsky [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: April 4, 1989

*Tape one, side one:*

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Joseph Donsky, for the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive. The date is April 4th, 1989. [tape off then on] Joe, can you please tell us where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of a concentration camp?

JD: I was in Germany in the 101st Airborne.

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

JD: No.

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

JD: Yes.

PS: Can you tell us a little about what you had heard or what you expected to see?

JD: Well, I had heard about the chambers, the gas chambers, and the mistreatment of Jews and other minorities.

PS: Before you arrived at the concentration camp, you had heard of the atrocities, but had you, from the time you arrived in Europe, had you seen anything at all of Nazi atrocities against humanity, in other words, France, if you were in France or any of the occupied countries? Did you see evidence there of Nazi inhumanities against civilians or soldiers?

JD: Not in France, but when I was in Germany, it happened, these were to me--I was a young man--older people talking, they thought I didn't understand, in German, how when some of our pilots what were shot down, came down, how they beat them with rubber truncheons.

PS: That was northern Germany.

JD: Right.

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

JD: I can't remember the name, but it was somewhere in Germany in the latter part of April in 1945.

PS: Could it have been possibly, if it was late April, the major camps that were liberated around that time were Buchenwald, Dachau, Landsberg, Mauthausen. Well, there

were a lot of, there were so many other smaller camps. To the best, can you, you'd say it was around the end April of 1945, right?

JD: Mmm hmm [affirmative].

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

JD: Well, when we first came into the camp I saw the lookout towers and all the barracks around. And the DPs came running out with their hands open for food, and took us around. [weeping; tape off then on] [unclear]

PS: Joe, I just asked you if, you mentioned that the prisoners came running out, hoping to get food. Would you like to describe anything else if you...

JD: Well, we gave them our GI food. And also they were, must have been from the British Army, Hindus with turbans on. We took care of them also. And one of the, we saw one of the inmates running around in the garbage cans looking for food, which, we got him out of there and gave him our food. One fellow came over, and he could speak fairly well English. And he wanted, one of the DPs, he wanted a telephone. He made the words and [unclear]. And he wanted a telephone and he mentioned his uncle from Philadelphia. And I wrote away to my wife, because I was married at that time, before the war. And she contacted his uncle. In later years we found out that his uncle did get him over to this country, and he settled in New York and became very prosperous.

PS: Can you estimate how many prisoners were there, how many were alive, had survived at the time of liberation?

JD: I really don't know. I couldn't say off hand.

PS: Yeah. Were there very many, to your, to the best of your recollection?

JD: Not too many.

PS: Yeah. I guess the condition of many of them, I guess you could say, was probably, they were, even though they had survived to that point, that they were probably beyond the point of saving. We found so many that even while, you know, medical units were trying to treat them, they died. Do you know if this particular camp was set up for Jews only, or if it was a mixed camp?

JD: This was a mixed camp.

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

JD: The only ones I saw were the Hindus and the Jews with the star on and the striped suits.

PS: Did you see any children?

JD: No.

PS: Can you, at that time were you personally or you, was your unit given any responsibilities in arranging for a transfer or care of the prisoners?

JD: No.

PS: At the time of, when you, this was the first you saw of the atrocities, the horrible, you know, sight that you saw at the concentration camp. At that time, Joe, did you realize that this was only one of many, many concentration camps?

JD: I did.

PS: When you entered the camp, were there any guards still, German guards still there?

JD: Yes.

PS: Can you describe the reactions of the prisoners as you entered the camp?

JD: Some of them wanted to jump on the guards, which we stopped. And we made the guards prisoners. They gave up their arms. They didn't want to fight any more.

PS: And the survivors naturally wanted to turn on the guards and take out a little bit of vengeance, hmm?

JD: Right.

PS: Did, were you, when your unit entered the camp, did the guards still have control? Were they still in control of the prisoners do you recall?

JD: Offhand I couldn't really say.

PS: Well I guess the fact that the survivors had not at that point attacked them and destroyed them, I guess they still did have...

JD: They had...

PS: Control of the camp?

JD: They had, yes, they had...

PS: Were there any S.S. still there do you recall?

JD: Offhand I couldn't recall.

PS: Was your unit prepared with food and medical supplies?

JD: No, we didn't come with extra food or medical supplies for that.

PS: In other words, you probably didn't...

JD: We gave our own food.

PS: Didn't even know it was...

JD: Yeah, we didn't know what kind of...

PS: You didn't know it was there. When you approached, did you know that in your zone you were approaching a concentration camp?

JD: Not until we were right up on it.

PS: Yeah. Was there, any attempt made to treat, in other words, did your unit have sufficient medical aid men, or medical officers, to offer any kind of treatment to the survivors?

JD: Yes.

PS: How long, how long were you there on the site?

JD: Three weeks to a month.

PS: Oh, you were there that long. Can you tell, when you say you fed them from your own rations, we've heard reports that many of them died because they had so little digestive system remaining that actually feeding them killed, until they learned the...

JD: Well what I've heard and seen, some of their bellies swelled up.

PS: Yeah.

JD: From eating it too fast.

PS: Were there any...

JD: Especially when you're undernourished. No, that didn't happen in our case, because these DPs I'll call them, displaced people, were put in trucks and taken out of the camp. And we kept that camp after that to keep these Germans prisoners.

PS: Yeah. Then the survivors were transferred out of the concentration camp very soon after liberation?

JD: Right.

PS: Of course, from then on you knew nothing about...

JD: No.

PS: What happened to them.

JD: Except for that one party.

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

JD: I thought I had hated them before, but this made me hate them more than ever.

PS: At this particular camp, did you see any mass execution facilities such as gas chambers, ovens?

JD: No, I didn't.

PS: Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit?

JD: They were all disgusted, whether they were Jews or non-Jews.

PS: Did you, especially with the non-Jews, did you converse much with them on this subject after the experience?

JD: Yeah, some of the fellows, particularly in my squad, were nauseated to see how human beings could be treated like that.

PS: You mentioned, Joe, that you remained in the camp for about what, two or three weeks?

JD: Roughly.

PS: Now naturally, I was gonna ask you whether your experience lingered after you left.

JD: Yes. Naturally, that goes without saying.

PS: Has it had any influence on your thinking as you look back in history?

JD: You mean up to the present?

PS: Yes.

JD: My wife tries to control me when I see certain things on television about what's going on in this country now with these White Supremacists and neo-Nazis, especially this Tom Metzger, who I see on television, and I feel that they shouldn't have him on television so that everybody should see what's happening. And then they send hate mail, and they send mail to other people to join their outfit.

PS: In your own mind, can you explain German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps? That's a rough question, I know.

JD: It is.

PS: Is there any way you can explain in your own mind what led to this situation?

JD: To set up the gas chambers?

PS: Yeah, the...

JD: You mean the German mind that set this up?

PS: Yeah the, right.

JD: It just was to destroy people, especially Jews. But these men were supposed to be brilliant men, Germans from centuries back. And I think they got carried away to the opposite, just to take over the whole world and destroy, as an excuse, destroy the Jews, and then conquer the whole world.

PS: Mmm hmm. Do you know, Joe, if there was a regimental history that included this experience?

JD: I don't think I follow that.

PS: If there was a regimental history, in other words, in the 101st Airborne Division, did they have a regimental history that, like many of them sent all their veterans a book.

JD: I have an Airborne book.

PS: Yeah.

JD: Yeah.

PS: Was there any mention...

JD: No.

PS: In the book?

JD: It's just, it's the history of our outfit.

PS: Yeah. Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in liberation? Friends or others whom you have met?

JD: Not particularly.

PS: Did you at that time have any number, have any idea at all of the number of camps or the number of prisoners in captivity? You mentioned that you did know, you had heard of concentration camps. Did you have any idea of the extent that the final figure, like you probably saw evidence of maybe a few thousand. But did you in your wildest imagination ever think that the final figures would be like six million Jewish people alone, and six to seven million non-Jews? Actually adding up to a total of...

JD: Over twelve...

PS: Twelve to thirteen million.

JD: No, never in my thoughts would ever come to such a great figures.

PS: Do you recall when you first heard of the gassing of Jews?

JD: Do I recall.

PS: Yeah. You did mention that you knew, you had heard early in combat...

JD: Yeah.

PS: Of the concentration camps. Had you actually heard of...

JD: Yeah.

PS: Do you remember?

JD: I think some time in 1944.

PS: Mmm hmm.

JD: Yeah.

PS: Did any of the prisoners you liberated ever contact you or your unit? You mentioned about the one who had a...

JD: Yeah.

PS: Relative in Philadelphia, your home town. Did you ever hear from him personally or meet him?

JD: Roughly about three years ago I called up. The uncle had passed away and one of his sons gave me his brother's address. And, because he said he kept the history of the family, I called him up and he gave me a phone number in New York where this particular man, who we liberated in this camp was living. But I never could find any contact.

PS: Yeah. So you never...

JD: No.

PS: Never were in contact with him. Joe, I've reached the end of the questions that I've prepared to, you know, ask you about. Is there anything that you would like to add to the testimony? Anything that, if it wasn't covered in the questions that I had?

JD: I think you covered it pretty thorough. I just hope that history don't repeat itself ever again, that we all should have to go through this, especially minorities, and to use an excuse to kill Jews for their own purposes.

PS: After what you saw, the war, the annihilation of so many millions of people, did you think that that being so terrible, and with so many witnesses, did you think that possibly this would mean that it could never happen again?

JD: No, because if we don't watch ourselves, it could happen again.

PS: My thought, too, is that since the war, if we thought that would end all genocide, there has been genocide almost as bad. You know, in the southeastern Asia where they literally can consume their own people. And in so many other, Uganda, Ethiopia, where it seems that, you know, no lessons are ever, ever learned. Okay, Joe, I want to thank you very, very much for your meaningful testimony. This is Phil Solomon interviewing

Joseph Donsky, for the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archives. And Joe, on behalf of the Archive Department, I want to thank you very much for your very meaningful testimony. Thank you.