

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MILTON HARRISON

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Nora Levin
Date: August 17, 1987

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MH - Milton Harrison [interviewee]

NL - Nora Levin [interviewer]

Date: August 17, 1987

Tape one, side one:

NL: This is Nora Levin, August 17th, 1987, interviewing Mr. Milton Harrison. Good morning. Good morning, Mr. Harrison.

MH: Good morning, Dr. Levin.

NL: Now, if you'll be good enough first, Mr. Harrison, to tell us a little about the areas where your particular army unit was just prior to your coming into the Buchenwald area.

MH: Prior to coming into the Buchenwald area, it was actually the mornings of April 10th and 11th while we were in an assembly area just outside of Mühlhausen, Germany. The purpose there was to reorganize, get our orders, and then move out to accomplish new missions that had been assigned to us.

NL: And what unit was that, please?

MH: I served with the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 6th Armored Division.

NL: Of the 6th Armored Division. Very good. And, had you been directed to go into the Mühlhausen area?

MH: Well, we ended our line of march there, and were waiting for further orders. At that time we supposed that we were going to head for Berlin. There were rumors that there were orders to that effect. We found out that those orders had been changed, and that we were to proceed due east.

NL: Due east. So you were in the Mühlhausen area on the 10th and 11th of April.

MH: That's correct.

NL: This is obviously 1944.

MH: Right.

NL: And...

MH: No, that's 1945.

NL: '45. This is after, oh, just before the victory, the Allied victory.

MH: That's right.

NL: I'm sorry, yes.

MH: It was shortly before the end of the war.

NL: Shortly before the end of the war. Were you at all aware of what had been happening to Jews in Europe prior to this time?

MH: Yes, I was. Because I received a lot of communication from home, from my mother, from the members of the congregation that I belonged to.

NL: What congregation was that?

MH: That was Beth El, in West Philadelphia, 58th and Walnut Streets.

NL: And you had heard in '44 or '45, do you remember?

MH: In '45.

NL: In '45.

MH: Yeah. I had received some notes from my mother, some notes from the people in the congregation about stories that were trickling back to the States about the atrocities going on.

NL: Did they include...

MH: Actually, in the army itself we heard nothing about this.

NL: Nothing in *Stars and Stripes*.

MH: Nothing in the *Stars and Stripes* that I can recall.

NL: And, in your letters from home, do you remember if your folks quoted any sources?

MH: Now that I don't remember.

NL: But...

MH: But I do remember, you know, hearing.

NL: They had had some word.

MH: They had some words, yeah.

NL: They had some information.

MH: Yeah.

NL: All right, and so, what happened then on April 11th?

MH: Well, about dawn on April 11th we had orders to proceed east from where we were, with no time objectives, but to reach the Saale River.

NL: How do you spell that?

MH: I believe it's S-A-L-L-E. [actually it is S-A-A-L-E] And...

NL: That's due east from Mühlhausen.

MH: From Mühlhausen.

NL: Okay.

MH: And establish a bridge there across the river there, which was the Weisse Saale River. And we proceeded to move from there, and we were moving very rapidly. Our division was splitting to different columns, and we were in the southern most column, on the front that we were covering.

NL: And why are you mentioning that particularly, was that of some importance in this?

MH: Yes, because the troops in our division and those supporting us were strung out for some 60 miles.

NL: Oh my. How many men were there?

MH: Well, in our battalion there were 980 men. In the division there was over 10,000. We...

NL: Now this--excuse me, go ahead.

MH: We met little or no resistance in our advance and sometime around mid-day, we bypassed the city of Weimar, for a number of reasons.

NL: And in this stretch out of 60 miles were some of the men then aware of Buchenwald?

MH: Not yet.

NL: Not yet.

MH: We passed Weimar, and we were moving a little slower than we had been all day, but still advancing very fast. And at that time our battalion was at the furthest east penetration that had been made. And we came to a town, it must have been close to 2:00 in the afternoon, of Hottel--Hottels--I'll give you the name of it [pause] Hottelstedt [phonetic].

NL: Hottelstedt.

MH: And when we got into Hottelstedt we met a little resistance and captured some SS troops.

NL: Had you seen any German civilians on the way?

MH: Oh yeah. We bypassed many little villages and towns and crossroads with two and three houses. But there was no indication at all of anything like Buchenwald.

NL: What was the reaction of the German civilians as you were marching through? Did you detect any special expressions or indications of welcome or anger?

MH: There was both.

NL: Both.

MH: The children were excited, because they--I can still see them standing on the sidewalk and by the houses, shouting, "*Panzer! Panzer!*" which is, "Tank! Tank!" The Germans seemed to be enthralled with tanks. We didn't get a chance to talk to any of the civilians because we didn't stop. We just kept moving. When we slowed down for any reason, [chuckling] I have to mention this, the only reason we left the tanks or the half tracks or the Jeeps was to relieve ourselves and then to hop back into the vehicle we were assigned to, and take off again.

NL: Did you encounter, or did you expect to encounter any other military units in this drive east?

MH: From the intelligence information that we had, there was troops in front of us. We weren't sure as to what type of troops or the numbers.

NL: American?

MH: No . I'm speaking of German now.

NL: German, I see. Wh-...

MH: We knew at this point that the nearest American troops to us were 60 to 80 miles away.

NL: Behind.

MH: Behind.

NL: [unclear.]

MH: Yes, following us. Our column, our battalion was stretched out at that point over maybe 20 or 30 miles, in length. I was with the point of the column. I was the medical NCO for the outfit. I was the acting First Sergeant of the Medical Detachment.

NL: And are we still on the 11th now?

MH: We are still on the 11th. As I said, around one to two o'clock we came to Hottelstedt, where we encountered some SS troops, and overpowered them, and started to question them. And this was the first that we had stopped since about five or six o'clock in the morning. We got nothing from them as to any information. They just wouldn't talk. They gave, they invoked the Geneva Convention, which was a joke.

NL: Hmm, yes.

MH: And wouldn't say anything further than that. When suddenly out of the woods Russian soldiers appeared. And we were quite surprised by this. They had German arms, and began shooting at the POWs that we had.

NL: The SS.

MH: The, shooting at the SS, yes. We overpowered them and disarmed them. And kept...

NL: You overpowered the Russians?

MH: The Russians.

NL: Really?

MH: Yes. And we began interrogating them, to find out where they came from. And this was the first that we heard of Buchenwald.

NL: From the Russians.

MH: From the Russians.

NL: I see.

MH: They began telling us stories of horror, of hangings and killings and starvation, burnings and incinerators and the officers and men that were there couldn't believe it. And since we were so far and communications were difficult--our battalion executive officer was Captain Bob Bennett--and Bob was in charge of the two columns that we were in, decided to send our recon and intelligence crew into the area.

NL: To Buchenwald.

MH: To Buchenwald, to verify the stories.

NL: Now excuse me. Did the Russians say they had liberated the prisoners at Buchenwald?

MH: The, no, the Russians were POWs there. They had been captured...

NL: I see.

MH: ...from a period of maybe three to four weeks prior to that to maybe a couple of months before that and were sent there. They were in a separate section.

NL: Separate from...

MH: From, yes, from what they...

NL: From other prisoners.

MH: From the other prisoners, from what they told us.

NL: Do you know if there were any Jewish prisoners of war among them?

MH: No, I don't.

NL: And they, these prisoners of war had escaped.

MH: Yes, prior to their escape, they and some of the healthier inmates in the camp overpowered what SS troops remained in the camp, because the majority of the German troops had fled.

NL: I see.

MH: And they told us that they had prisoners back there, but they went out to see how close the American troops were and didn't realize that we were as close as we were.

NL: Where had they gotten their arms?

MH: From the Germans.

NL: From the Germans...

MH: From the Germans...

NL: ...at Buchenwald.

MH: ...at Buchenwald...

NL: Did they kill...

MH: ...that they overpowered.

NL: ...some of the SS?

MH: Yes, they did.

NL: And you stopped them?

MH: Uh, well they, the immediate group that we were with, they wounded some of them, but they hadn't killed them. We stopped them from shooting. Now there were other bands, they told us, roaming through the countryside.

NL: People who had escaped?

MH: People that had escaped. Mostly the Russian POWs.

NL: POWs.

MH: They explained...

NL: And what...

MH: ...that the people in the camp weren't in too much of a shape to do anything but stay there. And...

NL: How did they look to you?

MH: The Russian soldiers didn't look too bad.

NL: They...

MH: They were undernourished, but they weren't at the, any place near the point of starvation. I'll get into that as we...

NL: All right.

MH: ...proceed. With the reconnaissance section on its way to Buchenwald with two of the Russian POWs, the others had been sent to the rear for further interrogation and for processing. We were passing them back along the column. We proceeded to our

objective that was some 30 miles still ahead of us. We were way ahead of schedule, because they figured it was going to take two to three days for us to get to the Saale River. About a half an hour later, and this is approximately around four o'clock, five o'clock in the, no, it could--approximately about six o'clock in the afternoon, Captain Bennett suddenly realized that he'd sent a tank, with four men in it, with no support. And I got a call on the radio to take two medical jeeps and two half tracks of infantry and proceed back along the line of march and pick up at the point where the recon crew took off for Buchenwald, and to follow them and catch up with them, and support them. Well, we proceeded back along that route, back to the--back to Hottelstedt. Went down the road that Captain Kiefer had taken and came to a crossroad and didn't know which way to go. We choose one road--we chose one road and proceeded down it, and we ran into small arms fire. Our orders had been to avoid any combat, so we called for smoke to cover us so that we could get away and almost immediately smoke grenades were fired in and we took off. We proceeded down the road for about three or four miles and we came to a camp. In this camp were nothing but children.

NL: Excuse me, was this Buchenwald all, you're just...

MH: Now this was part of Buchenwald. This was called Little Buchenwald.

NL: I see.

MH: And in this camp...

NL: Nothing but children.

MH: There was nothing but children.

NL: About how many do you think?

MH: Dr. Levin, there was so many of them that I don't remember what the number was. It was considerable.

NL: It was a large mass.

MH: It was a large mass of children. The average age was maybe about ten, twelve, fourteen years of age.

NL: You imagine these were Jewish children?

MH: They were Jewish.

NL: They were Jewish.

MH: They might be German, but I didn't talk to them. Seven-eighths of them were Jewish. The other eighth were the children of political prisoners, Communists, and in some cases orphans who...

NL: Can you describe what you saw?

MH: Well, the children weren't in too bad of a shape. They were very hungry and they were very tired, because they were worked at gathering wood in the forests and some of them worked in factories. And we were only there for about ten, twelve minutes.

NL: Could you leave anything for them? You didn't have any food...

MH: We didn't have anything to relieve them. We told them to stay where they were, and that someone would get to them as soon as possible. We did ask if anybody there

spoke English, and quite a few of them did. And we told them what we were looking for, and they gave us directions...

NL: To the main camp.

MH: To the main camp. We had to backtrack to the crossroad and follow their directions. I don't remember which way they told us to turn...

NL: Do you know...

MH: ...at this point.

NL: Excuse me, do you have any idea from which countries these children came? Could you detect?

MH: They were from all of the European countries--France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, I don't know if there were any Ukrainian or Russian kids there. The few that we spoke to were from France.

NL: From France. And they knew enough English to be able to communicate.

MH: Yeah. It's quite possible that Robert Clarey was one of these children.

NL: I see.

MH: But in speaking with him a few years ago, very briefly, he said that he didn't remember speaking to us.

NL: Did any of them look as though they were on the point of perishing, or were they functioning?

MH: The children were functioning.

NL: They were.

MH: They weren't on the point of functioning...

NL: I...

MH: In that camp.

NL: In that, yes. I ask because Buchenwald was supposed to be quote, a "privileged" camp as you probably know.

MH: Privileged? They were privileged to do two things: work and die.

NL: I'm saying that in quotation marks, of course.

MH: So am I.

NL: Yes. Yes. So, you only stayed for a bit and then you went on to...

MH: A bit, and then we proceeded to the main camp.

NL: And how far away was that?

MH: About five, six miles.

NL: I see.

MH: On the way, it was...

NL: This was quite isolated then.

MH: ...separated. It was quite isolated.

NL: Any signs of Germans within the range of your...

MH: The only--at that time, we didn't know whether the small fire arms fight that we ran into on the way to Little Buchenwald were from German sol--the firing was from

German soldiers or from Russian soldiers that were roaming the countryside. Sporadically we heard outbursts of fire. And on the way to Little Buchenwald and from Little Buchenwald to the main camp it could have been SS troops, it could have been the Russian soldiers. It could have been the two groups shooting at each other. But we encountered no further resistance from Little Buchenwald to Buchenwald. When we got to the gates of Buchenwald, we broke the gates down. There was no resistance, and in front of us we saw these rows on rows of barracks. The sergeant in charge of the infantry and I determined that the best thing to do would be to sweep through the barracks and see what was going on, and when we opened the barracks doors it was our first indication and our first sight. And it was a devastating sight. What we saw were human skeletons walking around. People were sick, lame, maimed, undernourished to the point their bellies were swollen. Upon closer examination by me and my three other medics that were with me, there were people with body sores, ulcers from malnutrition. We didn't go through all the barracks because we didn't have enough men to do that. There were 28 of us. There were the 24 infantry men and the four medical personnel that Captain Bennett had dispensed.

NL: Excuse me for interrupting. Were there several buildings in the main camp or many or...

MH: Oh yeah. It was like a good-sized little town.

NL: I see. And you went through just...

MH: We went through maybe a quarter or so of the barracks. Then we went outside, and when we got outside we didn't see Captain Bennett's tank and we start looking around for German soldiers around. We found some, that the inmates of the camp and the Russian POWs had staked down to the ground. We told the people in the camp to keep them under guard and hold them there, and that help would be on the way. In the meantime I tried to get a radio message out that there was nothing that I could do, that the medical situation was far beyond our comprehension and we didn't have the facilities even to begin to do anything.

NL: So you had some communication with some of the inmates.

MH: Well, we put a message out but we weren't sure that anybody was going to receive it at that point because we knew how fast everything was moving and how far everything was spread out.

NL: But I mean you were able to talk to some of the inmates.

MH: Oh yeah. There were people there that spoke English and I could manage to talk to some of them in the broken Yiddish that I spoke.

NL: Do you think...

MH: But they were surprised to find that there was a Jewish soldier.

NL: Were they?

MH: Yes. Among them.

NL: These were mostly or all Jews do you think?

MH: These were mostly all Jews. There were a couple of Luxembourgers and Belgians.

NL: Non-Jews.

MH: Non-Jews, that were there, that had been in the underground.

NL: Political prisoners.

MH: Political prisoners sent there.

NL: But they were thrust into the same...

MH: They were thrust into the same thing. There were some gay people there and I'm not sure, but I think there were even some people there that had been connected with the churches.

NL: Jehovah's Witnesses, possibly.

MH: Well, it's possible.

NL: Because they were persecuted too.

MH: Yeah, they were another denomination. And I didn't have the time to find out, nor did any of the men who were with me.

NL: Were any of them able to walk about and did they seem functional, or were they all in this quite dreadful...

MH: There was varying stages of--we'll call it health, for lack of anything else. From the people that were on the point of dying, up to people who were in fairly good shape. No one was in really great shape.

NL: Had they told--any of them told you that they had been working? Or didn't you have time to...

MH: We didn't have time really to determine that. There was fast communication. We were more interested in the appraisal on a military situation because we were out on a limb too. The heaviest weapon we had with us was a fifty caliber machine gun. The rest was all small arms--rifles and side arms.

NL: Now...

MH: When we were getting ready to leave...

NL: Could I just interrupt you for another minute, please? When you say you were, you sent out a message, and then you said you weren't sure anybody picked it up, did I understand that correctly?

MH: That's right. We didn't know, because of the type of radio that we had with us, that the range was sufficient for anybody to pick it out. And, the radio that we had with us was a battalion channel radio. And it had one outside channel for the combat command that we were in, which was CCA, Combat Command A. But we weren't sure that anybody would have picked up the message that we sent out.

NL: Do you think you were, do you know if you were indeed the first military, American military unit to see...

MH: Unequivocally.

NL: Unequivocally.

MH: Unequivocally.

NL: This was...

MH: I can state...

NL: Yes.

MH: ...that the first American soldiers there were Captain Kiefer and his reconnaissance crew, which consisted of four men, and the 28 men that were sent by Captain Bennett to support and to look for him. We were the first American soldiers there. In fact, until we were relieved, with one exception, the crew that had fired the smoke that covered us was from an engineer heavy weapons company. And they were totally lost. They were miles ahead because of the confusion with the rapid advance on the front. They had become lost. They couldn't find the unit that they were supposed to be attached to, which was not the, any part of the 6th Armored Division. It was one of the other divisions that were following us. But they had gotten so far ahead of where they were, they had a multi-channel radio, and when we asked for the smoke, and gave the coordinates on the maps that we had, they fired it. Now, they came in after we left Buchenwald, oh, maybe a half an hour later.

NL: Were they able to help the inmates in any way?

MH: They stayed there exactly ten to fifteen minutes, and they left, because there was nothing they could do. They were scared, because they knew at that point that they were out on a limb, someplace way out on a spearhead thrust.

NL: Were they able to send messages to other...

MH: No.

NL: No.

MH: They backtracked the way they came in and attached themselves to one of the other infantry battalions in our division until they could locate their unit and return to it. But back to the Buchenwald story. Just as we were preparing to leave--and we had told the people to stay in the camp, guard the prisoners that they had--two men approached Jimmy Paust [phonetic], who was my driver, and myself, and said that they had something to show us. I'm going to backtrack from this point a little, to Captain Kiefer. When Captain Kiefer and his crew got into the camp and he dismounted from the tank and walked in, there was about maybe five to seven thousand people in the, what we'll call, the parade ground area. The only thing that these people knew about armour, and the only name that they knew, was Patton.

NL: Patton.

MH: And they assumed that Captain Kiefer was Patton and had come to, you know, liberate them, take care of them, what have you. And they began tossing him in the air and carrying him around on their shoulders. Kiefer, being of German extraction, could speak German, and he had an interpreter with him and he told the people that he wasn't Patton and that he just came to the camp to see what was going on and that other help would be coming. And they left. Now the two men that came up to me and Jimmy Paust,

my driver, took us over to the hospital in the camp. And, when we got in there, they opened the door to a room off of the side of it and I got sick. Because in front of me I saw a lampshade sitting on a desk made of human skin, with a tattoo of what appeared to be some kind of an angel on it. And on the wall behind the desk were rows and rows and rows of bottles with human parts in them--fingers, ears, noses, hands, feet, genital organs...

NL: Ohhh.

MH: These were the souvenirs and toys of Ilse Koch. Now Paust and I told these two men to-

Tape one, side two:

NL: Side two, continuing our interview with Mr. Patterson.

MH: Harrison.

NL: Excuse me, Harrison. I beg your pardon. I'm sorry.

MH: Okay. As I said, we told the two men to stay there, and guard the place with their lives, because I realized that it had some significance and would be important to the civilian affairs people.

NL: Were there any inmates in the so-called hospital?

MH: Dr. Levin, at this point I don't recall whether there were or not.

NL: Any sign of Ilse Koch? Did you...

MH: No.

NL: Know at that time...

MH: No.

NL: What had happened to her?

MH: Ilse Koch had left, according to these two men, with her staff, even before the SS deserted the camp.

NL: About how many German prisoners were there, do you suppose? Could you tell?

MH: Some 20 to 21,000...

NL: And...

MH: At that time.

NL: The inmates were able to guard them?

MH: I don't know what the size of the SS guard was originally at the camp. When they fled on the morning of April 11th in the early hours, which was probably around ten or eleven o'clock in the day, they left maybe 50 to 60 guards there. The--when the Russians broke out of their POW compound, and got some of the healthier men to help them, they overpowered, and there were some people wounded there. The inmates, there were a couple of the inmates that were wounded there, and my other two medics took care of them. I didn't have anything to do with that. There were about 15 or 20 SS prisoners that the inmates and a couple of Russian soldiers, who stayed in the camp, had when we were there. At that point we left, because we felt that we had to rejoin the column and I felt that I had to report to a medical officer what I saw so that he could advise Division and Division could advise Corps and Corps could do something about getting some medical assistance and food and clothing into that. Incidentally, the ovens were still hot when we were there. We did see the gassing room and the oven area. And the ovens were still hot. As I said, I took sick. My stomach went into knots and I got, I wound up with the dry heaves. I was so sick from what I saw.

NL: What was the reaction of Captain Kiefer? Could you describe?

MH: Well, Captain Kiefer and his crew didn't actually, other than seeing the emaciated people that were there, they didn't see too much. And when he got, when Captain Kiefer got back to the column, he reported to his superior officers and by that time to Division and Corps officers who had come up to evaluate the information that was going on. But he had no idea really what the true situation there was. It was only when the 28 of us rejoined the column and began telling Captain Bennett and Captain Dudas, the medical officer, what we encountered and what we saw, that the true, you know, the story came out. Then when the...

NL: When was that, Mr. Harrison?

MH: This was about eight o'clock, between eight and nine o'clock in the evening.

NL: That same day.

MH: It was that same day.

NL: And what was their reaction?

MH: Their reaction was that they really didn't--they believed it because we reported it--but they couldn't understand the inhumanity of man to man in the situation.

NL: Were they...

MH: But we were all hardened combat soldiers. We weren't novices any of us to battle, and death and destruction was--wasn't a stranger to us. But what the 32 of us saw there, I don't know, it's just really indescribable. The pictures that you see in books and magazines and Civil Corps pictures from the Army, they're pictures, they're flat, and it's hard to put into words, really. You have to remember that I was a 19-year-old at the time.

NL: 19 at the time.

MH: Right, 19. And for days I felt like somebody had kicked me in the stomach. That's how sore my stomach was. My outrage was something else. But you know, being a civilized person, even though you're a soldier, when I saw German prisoners, the feeling was I'd like to go over and slit their throats or shoot them. But, while I was trained that way, I wasn't raised that way. [chuckles] I can laugh about it now, but there's tears in my eyes as you can see. Now...

NL: Can we again, excuse for the interruption. I wanted to make sure I followed this particular thread. This group that you alerted later on in the evening, they came back to the camp and did they bring with them...

MH: Well...

NL: ...some food and medical help?

MH: Because of the military situation and the length of the lines of the tank columns, it was about midnight, or shortly after, when two officers from our Division headquarters arrived at the camp and at the same time as they got there--do you want their names?

NL: Please.

MH: They were Captain Ed Coates who was the Assistant G-1 of the Division, and Captain Davison, who was the...

NL: When did they arrive?

MH: ...Civilian Affairs officer. They arrived around midnight, at the same time that Captain Rabbi Herschel Schacter arrived there.

NL: All three?

MH: All, yeah. Now, Captain Schacter had some people with him, his chaplain's assistant, a driver, and I don't know who else, because the information that I'm giving you now is information that I have gotten over the years. My position now is the--I'm one of the historical officers of the Buchenwald Information Committee of the 6th Armored Division Association.

NL: These three men, did they bring some help?

MH: No, they didn't.

NL: No?

MH: Captain Davison was there to appraise, to see what type of troops he would have to draw in to really assist the people. Captain Schacter was sent there by 20th Corps to--because it was my reporting that most of the inmates were Jewish.

NL: I see.

MH: Now, very shortly after they got there, the German troops that were--and they were mostly SS--caught between our armored columns, decided to go back to Buchenwald and wreck some havoc and make a last stand there. They were WaffenSS and they didn't know what the word surrender meant. So they attacked the main camp at Buchenwald with small arms and mortar fire. Captain Davison put a call out.

NL: Excuse me, were there any American troops at the main camp at this time?

MH: No, just the men that I had mentioned.

NL: I see.

MH: They put a call out for assistance, and a, part of our reconnaissance squadron responded to the call. And they came there, and they put out a call for more troops. And my sister battalion, the 44th Infantry Battalion that was way behind our advance, sent troops over to assist, and they fought a battle there that lasted through the 12th--because we're into the 12th of April now--and ended some time around noon on the 13th.

NL: My word. That was quite a stand.

MH: Yeah. They overpowered the SS and forced them to surrender, and other, a few other troops from our Division came into the area--the 25th Engineer Battalion, and one of the Tank Battalions, the 68th Tank Battalion participated in the battle and one of their tanks was hit and destroyed sitting next to the hospital. But fortunately they got the fire out in the hospital. We lost the tank and the men and the crew, but they were able to get the fire out and preserve Ilse Koch's laboratory. I'm not sure which day it was, whether it was on the 13th or the 14th, the men of the 44th Infantry Battalion captured Ilse Koch and some of her people in the city of Weimar.

NL: Were there any inmates who were killed during this battle, do you know?

MH: Yes, there were, and a soldier who was in the 86th Recon Squadron, a medic by the name of Simon Elias who lives in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania...

NL: E-L-I-A-...

MH: A-S--gave aid and assistance to the troops and to the civilians that were wounded.

NL: And he's in Willow Grove now?

MH: He's in Willow Grove.

NL: I'll try to interview him.

MH: Well, you want to shut this off for a second? [tape off then on] Okay.

NL: So, you said that a medic in Willow Grove...

MH: Yeah.

NL: Did offer some assistance. We'll try to get in touch with him.

MH: Yeah, well...

NL: And now...

MH: There were other men too. I know of Sy because Sy and I have been friends over the years.

NL: Excuse me, I think I'm going to [tape off then on]...

MH: As I said, the battle ended late in the day on the 13th when the troops of the 6th Armored were relieved by Company E of the 417th Infantry Regiment of the 76th Infantry Division. Now a man by the name of Morris Resnik, who lives in Roslyn, Pennsylvania, was with them. They cleaned up around the camp, captured some prisoners and took over until Civilian Affairs units arrived a few days later. Now, on the 14th of April, our commanding officer, General Robert Groh, toured the camp. With him were some staff officers of the 4th Armored Division and the 80th Infantry Division. Now the area around Buchenwald was declared a non-combat zone on the 14th of April. And...

NL: Excuse me, do you know what the staff officers' reactions were to their tour?

MH: Absolute horror. General Groh died this past year, and it's unfortunate that you can't get his actual words. I will try to get his memoirs on this for you.

NL: Please.

MH: And I'm quite sure that I can.

NL: We'd, we'll make copies if...

MH: Yes.

NL: You don't want to lose the original. We'd be very, very glad to have those...

MH: All right.

NL: Mr. Harrison.

MH: So, 20th Corps and 12th Army Group Headquarters moved into Weimar. Now General Groh ordered the people in Weimar out, to start burying the dead. And our graves registration platoon from our medical battalion, the 76th Medical Battalion, tried to record as many of the names as they could get from survivors, among the, you know, from the dead corpses. And...

NL: Is that available in some documentation?
MH: So far we have not been able to locate any of those records.
NL: This would be in the Graves Registration...
MH: Yeah.
NL: ...Division.
MH: We have not been able to, we don't know where they were turned over to, whether it was to a civilian agency or the army, and we're still looking to find information because we feel they'd be vital...
NL: Very.
MH: ...to the Holocaust story.
NL: Absolutely.
MH: Now, on April the 15th, General Patton came to tour the camp. And he was so overwhelmed with what he saw that he couldn't finish the tour. He left. Totally aghast, shaken, and General Groh continued the guided tour of Patton's staff that remained behind.
NL: Excuse me, were any, did any of these units bring any medical aid in or food or clothes?
MH: The medical assistance began arriving in the camp on the 14th and 15th. Now [unclear] what these units were, I don't know, and the records are not very clear.
NL: Really?
MH: Yeah. It's unclear to me. It's unfortunate.
NL: Do you understand why that's the case?
MH: We are still looking, and trying to find out as much information as we can, so that we can pass it on to people who are interested in the Holocaust.
NL: Do you think it's possibly because the Russians also had a hand in the liberation?
MH: Well, actually the Russians had no hand in the liberation except their POWs who were...
NL: Well, they claimed that...
MH: Now, Russians, the Russians have claimed...
NL: They claimed to have liberated the camp.
MH: The official ruling of the United States Army is, and I quote, "Buchenwald was liberated by the inmates of the camp, and the Russian POWs on April the 11th, 1945. Combat Command A of the 6th Armored Division were the first troops there."
NL: That's the official...
MH: And that's the official...
NL: ...word.
MH: ...ruling by the United States Army.
NL: Yes, but the documentation is still very fragmentary apparently.
MH: Yes it is. In fact, it's very hard to--difficult. As you know, I showed you a Summary After Battle Report and it's just a brief sentence in there as to the camp and all it

says is we overran the place. But we make no claim, that's the 6th Armored Division and any of the men involved in it, we make no real claim to being liberators of the camp. The historians and scholars have handed out the title of liberator. We overran the place.

NL: You discovered it.

MH: We discovered it.

NL: And you are witnesses.

MH: And we are witnesses. Right.

NL: Well that's an extremely important kind of documentation. But I must say I'm puzzled about the fact of your having trouble getting this documentation. This, it sounds suspicious.

MH: Well, there are references where CCA of the 6th Armored Division is noted as "Liberators" of Buchenwald. Yaffa Eliach in the *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* on page 256 makes reference to us. The book by [Yaffa] Eliach and Bonnie [Brana] Gurewitsch, *The Liberators*, on pages 16 to 25 mentions us: "The Liberation of Concentration Camps by Armed Forces." And this is to believe, believed to be an army publication. On page six there's a picture of Rabbi Herschel Schacter conducting *Shavuot* services at Buchenwald. And in the caption it says, "Liberated by the 6th Armored Division, U.S. Army photo and caption." In *Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust*, by Milton Meltzer, we're mentioned, and I take the liberty to quote Elie Wiesel from this book. He says, "At 6:00 in the evening, the first American tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald." The tank that Elie Wiesel saw was Captain Fred Kiefer's, of the 9th Armored Infantry Battalion, of the 6th Armored Division just prior to its departure. It was the only tank there at that time.

NL: Important. Correct

MH: Well, do you want this in there?

NL: Yes.

MH: As further information and proof of the 6th Armored Division's involvement in Buchenwald, on Wednesday, May 23rd, 1984, the mayor of Beaufort, Luxembourg, Leon Bartheims, presented the *Honoris Causa* Medal of the Council, La Resistance of Luxembourg to the 6th Armored Division Association for freeing the members of the resistance of that country from Buchenwald. A similar award was given by representatives of the Belgian resistance. Mayor Bartheims was a prisoner in Buchenwald at the time of liberation.

NL: Very important verification, yes. Now, could you just add another word about what you did after you left the main camp.

MH: Well, after I left the main camp, we proceeded to find our column, which by that time was some thirty miles away. And we rejoined the column. I and Sergeant Michael Weiss, who was in charge of the infantry with us, sought out Captain Bennett, and we reported to him what we saw in the camp. And I reported to Captain Roger Dudas who was my immediate commanding officer and gave him an evaluation of what I saw. We conferred with Captain Kiefer briefly, and told him what he didn't see there. And at that

point, information in detail was sent back to our Division rear with the facts, you know, on it. Now, in our Division history, because it would become such a massive thing if every body's individual story was told, and it became our habit, more or less, in our history to report only the primary details of any battle or operation, the story that's listed in there is "Kiefer's patrol into Buchenwald," since he and the three men with him were actually the first American soldiers to see Buchenwald. The 28 of us that arrived there seeking actually Kiefer to support and aid him, the few of us that are left or that we know of, call ourselves The Fifth Man.

NL: Why?

MH: Because we were the fifth man, you know, to--we were the second group, but we figure that...

NL: Were there, there were four?

MH: The 28 of us were only five. We're only the fifth because there were four...

NL: Four originals.

MH: ...before us.

NL: I see.

MH: Now out of all of the men that were involved in the first group to get to Buchenwald before the battle, there are only six or seven of us left that we know of.

NL: After you returned to civilian life, obviously you wanted to pick up the threads of your old life, but you obviously had these images imprinted on your mind. When did you start thinking about recording this information or making it available?

MH: Oh, Dr. Levin, we started very early to have reunions, after we came home from the service. And I can tell you, I haven't been to all the reunions that we've had, but at every reunion that we go to, we rehash battles and go over things and--but this isn't all we do. But one of the things that always comes up in the discussions is Buchenwald, and what we saw and what we experienced. And whether it's Jew or Gentile, and we have a couple of Buddhists because we had a couple of Chinese fellows in the Division too, the horror of what we experienced, those of us that were there. Now, not all of the men in the Division participated in the action. It was segments from different outfits and different units were there. But, in every one of our CP rooms where the individual battalion men assemble, I can assure you, because we roam from room to room and we talk, because we have friends all over, Buchenwald is always in the discussion. And if somebody new comes along, we find something else out. We find out something new about it. We're a unique group of men. We were a unique group of men in battle, and we're still a unique group of men.

NL: When did you last meet?

MH: Last year, in San Antonio, Texas. I wasn't there. We're meeting September 9th, 10th, and 11th in San Francisco. And already that I know of, we have about 600 men, their wives, and children, attending.

NL: My.

MH: We have put 55 of our children and grandchildren through college, through scholarship funds.

NL: Marvelous.

MH: We're one of the largest supporters of the Patton Historical Museum in Fort Knox, Kentucky. We've tried to participate where we can in Holocaust Gatherings, although not successful in a great many of the cases, because as I told you, we seem to be an ignored part of history.

NL: Well, you're not going to be any longer if I can do anything about it. I was wondering, just as a last thought...

MH: Now, I spoke for a number of years when I came home at synagogues and a few of the colleges around the area. And then Captain Kiefer took over those details for the organization and I sort of got out of it, until eight years ago.

NL: Have you ever spoken at the Youth Symposium here at Gratz in March? We have several...

MH: No, I haven't.

NL: ...hundred students.

MH: I've spoken at the University of Pennsylvania a few times. Four years ago I spoke there. I spoke at Temple University at the Newman Center four years ago. I have spoken recently through the Holocaust Awareness Museum.

NL: If I give your name to the people in charge of the symposium, which will be held next Spring, would you consider speaking to students?

MH: Yes, I would.

NL: Because I think you have an extremely important message, not just your witnessing, but the fact that you are a mixed unit, ecumenical in the best sense of the word, and you're a person who's been trying to reclaim our humanity after this dreadful, dreadful history. Are there any further words, any messages you'd like to convey on the tape, Mr. Harrison?

MH: [pause] Yes, there is a message I would like to convey on the tape. And it's to the historians and the scholars. It's not meant in a detrimental way, but the authenticity of people who claim to be liberators should be checked. Because in every camp that was overrun or liberated, the only liberators were the first handful of men that got there. The other people that got there were sightseers, some were observers, and some were sent there as service personnel. And when these people are interviewed and they speak, they should be identified by what they were. And as a classic example, I give our Division and the men from our Division that were involved in Buchenwald. In forty-some years, being almost totally ignored when we have--we're the only ones who can really tell the story. Not the sightseers, not the observers or the service people that were there. But the first men in there that were struck with the awesomeness of the situation. By the time the other people got there...

Tape two, side one:

NL: ...two, side one, continuing our interview with Mr. Milton Harrison. Would you be good enough to repeat this last sentence that the camps were in the process of being cleaned because I don't think that got on.

MH: At the end of the previous tape I had stated that there were three categories of men that came to Buchenwald, or any concentration camp: the actual men who were there, the combat men who were the liberators; people that were sent there to service the camps; and then sightseers and observers. And distinctions should be made between them. When a great many of these people got to these camps, even if it was three, four, five days later, the camps were already in the process of being cleaned and the people fed and reclothed. And their observations are second hand. The only true observations are the men that went in there with the tanks and the rifles.

NL: On the 11th.

MH: Well, in the case of Buchenwald it was on the 11th. The men that fought the battle there on the 12th and 13th and, Dr. Levin, General Patton could have considered himself a liberator of Buchenwald. He never made claim to that. In his memoirs, if someone wants to take the time to go through them in the section on Buchenwald, it tells of the horror that he saw and that he had to leave. But there is no word of him as being a liberator or the first soldier there.

NL: Well, Mr. Harrison, thank you profoundly and sincerely for the time you've taken to come and make this important revision and correction in the historical record. I will definitely recommend that you come and speak to the Youth Symposium and to children in the classrooms and elsewhere. And our gratitude to you for this material. Now...

MH: Dr. Levin, everything that I have stated here and in the material that I have given to you can be authenticated either through the officers that are still alive from my Division and my Unit, the men that were with me that are still alive, the Army records at the Pentagon and at the Military Historical Library at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, at Carlisle Barracks. Some are in the Archives and are classified, but everything that I have stated is the truth.

NL: Thank you. I truly believe that. Now, just one last word. Do try to make contact with others in your group who might be interested and willing to either record their own experiences, to send us any written material and documentation they may have. We'd be glad to make copies of that. Or if people are far from Philadelphia, of course we'd be very glad to send them blank tapes and the questionnaire. I'll now give you a copy of the questionnaire and perhaps you'll be able to give copies to those men who you'll see. Thank you very much.

MH: Thank you, and I'll--we have a reunion coming up September 9th, 10th, and 11th, and I will interview... [talking in background]

NL: Excuse me, come in, [unclear]. I'll be right with you.

MH: Any of the men that were involved there, and see if I can get some reaction and interviews and...

NL: Any documentation.

MH: Any documentations for...

NL: Thank you. Thank you very much indeed. We appreciate your coming in.