

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JOEL C. NICHOLS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Lois Olena

Date: November 20, 2000

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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JN - Joel C. Nichols [interviewee]

MN - Mrs. Nichols, Joel's wife

LO - Lois Olena [interviewer]

Date: November 20, 2000

Tape one, side one:

LO: This is Lois Olena interviewing Mr. Joe Nichols, November 20, year 2000. Mr. Nichols, state your full name and residence and then tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

JN: Joel C. Nichols, Birmingham, Alabama. My year previous to going into Germany started with Normandy invasion. We went through Saint Lo, France, we went through Charleroi, Belgium on down through the Liege, Belgium and then we were stationed in Verviers, Belgium for a number of months. I imagine we were regrouping and getting ready for the final push on into Germany. I was in the Battle of the Bulge as the Germans broke through on December the 16, 1944 and once they caused this great balloon where they broke through, we had to jump back 80 miles, over--got a half of our outfit while they operated, we went to the, back to Charleroi, Belgium, but then when they cut off this big bubble it was caused there then we all pushed back to the German lines. We went through Aachen, Germany and followed the infantry--I was not in the infantry but we followed the infantry. I was in a radar outfit that we control fighter bombers and things like that, going in to strafe and bomb and then bringing them back out.

LO: What was your unit number or battalion or division?

JN: I was in the 327th Fighter Control Squadron. We had some Signal Corps men attached to us who were out in the field in the radar units. I worked in the operation tent where the big maps were and we had to know where our front lines were at all times so it, we wouldn't bomb our own men you know. So we were fairly close to the front lines most of the time, but we worked with two outfits when we would leapfrog one another.

LO: Were you an officer or what rank were you?

JN: No, I was just a buck sergeant. That's as high as I ever got but I was right in on the operation tent. Most of us all knew the same work.

LO: Then you said you were 35?

JN: No, I was, I'd say about, I was in--when I went into Germany I was probably 29, I was 30 when I got out.

LO: Okay.

JN: And we went on through Aachen, Germany; I remember a place, I think, called Marburg, Germany and it was from that area or somewhere around there that they came and took us into the concentration camp, Buchenwald, and that's where I learned all of this stuff that I have given to the newspapers and they made my story from that.

LO: Okay. Did you know of the existence of this particular camp before you arrived there? And if so, what had you heard about it?

JN: We had just heard spotty things concerning the way the Germans were treating people. I didn't know particularly about the Jewish situation until we went there, Buchenwald. We went through a place called Malmédy and I had, I knew about what the Germans did to our soldiers there. Over 100 of our GI's had their hands tied in back of them and all of them killed, shot in the back of the head or whatever and they were killed. We knew of the atrocities but I didn't know particularly about the Jewish situation, especially how bad it was until I went through Buchenwald.

LO: Do you remember the exact date that you came into Buchenwald?

JN: No, I couldn't tell you that. That's been 55 years ago.

LO: It had already been liberated though, right, when you came in?

JN: Oh yes. It had been liberated and they had cleaned it up and disinfected the place, very heavy, heavy disinfectant but I told in the newspaper story something that I've never heard anyone else state in any stories about the atrocities over there; but for miles before I got to the camp there was a terrible stench that just wouldn't go away and it got worse the closer we got to the place and this was from miles and miles around the place. It wasn't just a few city blocks. And then when we got there and I saw all the artifacts on display, the colorful lampshades made out of human skin--I was in the first groups to see all of these things. I saw the large rooms with meat hooks all the way around the top of the walls, and we were told that this is where the people would be hung up by their coats, in the back of their coats and possibly knocked in the head and then thrown into the gas chambers and one of the gas chambers itself still had a piece of human skull caught in the grate there. I do remember that. I don't remember all of the artifacts, they had tables full of it but the stench and the meat hooks around the top and the gas chambers themselves and those colorful lampshades made out of skin, they--that doesn't leave my memory. That stays with me all the time. I don't think on it all the time, I'm not trying to say that.

LO: But it made an impression.

JN: It made an impression that I can't forget. And I had never heard anyone--but since my story came out--I'm a member of the Battle of the Bulge Veterans that has a chapter here in Birmingham and I went out there just recently for a meal that we have once every month and one of the men told me that he's glad I put that in the paper because he remembered that stench and he had never heard anybody tell about it.

LO: That was important be--to point out because so many near the camp said they never knew what was going on.

JN: Oh yes. Oh yes. That, the people there, the pictures that I had, I had about, I guess I had about 20. Now the pictures that I made and developed, I did not take the pictures, but one of the men and I don't even remember his name--of course, a lot of them I don't remember, I remember a few but I don't remember what his name was but one of the men after we went to Buchenwald, he told me of the negatives that he had for his

pictures and if I wanted a copy of them he would take me in the darkroom and teach me how to develop them, which he did. And that was the first pictures I ever developed in my life although I became a photographer, professional, after I got out, several years after I got out.

LO: Now those pictures, the ones that--just for the sake of the tape, let me back up and say that I learned of Mr. Nichols experience in the war through an article in the *Birmingham News*.....

JN: *Birmingham Post*.

LO: I'm sorry, *The Birmingham Post-Herald* on October 14, 2000, in section E where he discusses several photos that he was in possession of that he was interested in seeing if someone locally would like to have a copy of these, would like to have these pictures and they have since been given to a high school at Shades Valley and the lady who interviewed him from *The Birmingham Post-Herald*, her name is Elaine Witt and a relative of hers has a copy of these photos.

JN: Right.

LO: Now, it's my understanding, I think from Elaine Witt or perhaps yourself, I don't remember, that the pictures that were taken, that this man gave to you and that you developed a copy of, were actually of Nordhausen?

JN: Yes.

LO: Okay.

JN: Now she checked with the archives in Washington I guess, and I'm glad she did because I didn't know.....

LO: So they recognized it as Nordhausen.....

JN: They recognized those pictures that I had, and there were some that was much worse than what she put in the paper, one in particular, had two or three little babies laying there in all this bodies there, you know and that's where I first began to understand how utterly depraved man can become and I've never forgotten that.

LO: When you were in Buchenwald, did you see any prisoners? Were there any prisoners still there?

JN: No, they were already taken out and I guess were being.....

LO: Cared for?

JN:cared for by the army.

LO: Okay. Is there anything else in your description of the camp that you would like to make a record of, besides the things you've already mentioned.

JN: That's really about all I remember about it. It's been so long ago. I do know that within reason they had white washed all of the walls in where these meat hooks were and where they had everything had been recently whitewashed because I imagine it was in terrible shape, killing all those people you know.

LO: And even with that, it was still a terrible stench?

JN: Oh yeah, the stench just wouldn't go away, and yet they told us that the Germans living there--the army made the civilians come in and clean the place up and the first thing they said was, we didn't know this was going on. And with that stench, they had to know. One thing I would like to say, I didn't tell this story or get it in the paper and I'm not talking to you for the purpose of showing any hatred to the German people. The German people were wrong, they let a despot get in charge of their country and put them under his thumb, and he led them into what this was. And those people were fighting for their very lives, because I know what the bombing did and all, I saw every--when I went through Saint Lo, the only thing I saw that was standing in this whole city of Saint Lo was a little birdhouse sitting on a little tree limb just about four or five inches thick, and it was standing up 15 or 20 feet tall, that birdhouse. Everything else was in ruins and so I know what those people was going through but after I got into Buchenwald and saw that, I knew why we were there, cause we, somebody had to stop that.

LO: Right.

JN: So I don't hold my head down in shame that we stopped that from going on over there and we stopped it, let nobody kid you, but it took an awful--and there's no glory in war.

LO: They paid a high price.

JN: We paid a high price, but they paid a high price. But I'm glad that we, the United States, did to Germany after the war to get them back up on their feet, helped them to establish a democracy and look how much better the West Germany turned out then East Germany who was kept under the thumb of the Russians for all those years.

LO: So you're.....

JN: So I have no hatred or anything; hatred will kill you.

LO: Right.

JN: It will ruin you. I have no hatred and I don't want any hatred for the people. I'm glad they're up and out of that but they had to be stopped. That's all there was to it.

LO: So your experience of being there and seeing what you saw really affected how you felt about being a part of the war and about fighting Germany?

JN: Oh yes, yes. Well, it affected my entire life afterwards. Like I say, it taught me the--how terrible man can be, and it taught me that we need to never let that happen again. Somehow or another we need to stop it. But I got into church work, teaching the bible and all like that after I got out, and all of this had a sway on my entire life since then because we just don't need to let stuff like that happen again.

LO: That's right. Do you recall the reactions of the other men in your unit? Did you talk with any of them afterwards about what you experienced?

JN: I don't really remember. I'm sure we discussed it and had our--but, you know we were experiencing all of the horrors as we went through and I'm not trying to say that we, we didn't suffer nothing like the infantry boys did. We traveled in trucks and things like that. I saw infantry men come back to our area for rest and recuperation and the biggest

problem they had, and this was two feet of snow on the ground most all the time during this rough part, their feet were frozen, a lot of feet and toes were frozen and stuff like that. We, in my outfit, we would bivouac in buildings and things like that whenever it's possible and most of the time that like in Normandy we were right in foxholes and all like that. And we didn't go through near what those boys on the front line went through, but we saw it all and we had a few scares, bombs dropping close by. I had got out from under a table one time I had during a bombing run and that was the first time that I ever, it was close enough that I tasted gun powder on my lips after it was all over with. I got under a table and couldn't get out. They had to pick the table up to let me out. I don't know how I got under there but those things were mild according to what those boys on that front line went through. And we supported them with everything we could, but I'm not trying to build us up in anyway because the old Joe on that front line, now he had it.

LO: You're right. It took everybody though.

JN: Oh yeah.

LO: It took everybody supporting. How long did you remain in the camp in Buchenwald? How long were you there and witnessed what you did?

JN: I would say maybe an hour and a half, maybe two hours. I don't really recall, but it was long enough to see all of the horrors that they had perpetrated.

LO: And that, those images lingered with you after you left?

JN: Oh yes, yeah, yeah.

LO: In your own mind, how do you explain German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps? Do you, have you thought about that?

JN: I've heard a preacher just recently, that's led me to believe why. Now I understand that, from him, that Hitler was a Catholic and they hated the Jews and called them Christ killers, which you can't show that in the Bible. I know the Bible well enough to know that even Christ himself says, "No man takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord and if I lay it down, I have authority to take it up again." And even when he died on the cross he stated, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit." Which means literally he dismissed his spirit. So no man killed Christ, he gave his life for us but I know from the past and from the present, there are people that still hate the Jews because they call them Christ killers. And--now that's what I've heard and I don't know whether that's a fact or not, I don't know. What, I mean who knows what goes on in the mind of somebody like Hitler.

LO: I heard once that Hitler said that he was just finishing what the church had set out to do, which is a very unfortunate thing that unfortunately a lot of Christians antisemitism existed throughout the centuries and...

JN: Oh yeah.

LO: That's why I feel it's so important for me as a Christian and for you as a Christian to do what we can to preserve this part of Jewish history and to have your eyewitness account of what you saw. That this isn't just a Jewish project, you know?

JN: Yes.

LO: We need to do what we can as Christians to preserve the history.

JN: Well I know the history of the Jews as well as any layperson I guess. I've studied from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph right on into Egypt, out of Egypt--I know that God told Abraham that I'm going to give you this land but you're not going to get it right away. Your people will be in a foreign land for 400 years, and they were. And they became slaves and they brought, God brought them out. So I know the history all the way through of the Jewish people. And I don't think God is through with the Jewish people yet because the Bible teaches that and I, so I guess if somebody was to ask me if I was pro-Jewish, I would have to say yes.

LO: [chuckle] Let me ask you this question. After you left the camp, were there any official or unofficial meetings of your unit to discuss what you'd experienced at the camp, or do you know if there was a regimental history that included this experience? I realize you were still in the midst.....

JN: Right.

LO:of a battle and so on.

JN: It, I didn't notice any meetings or anything or anyone coming to me other than this one boy with those.....

LO: Pictures.

JN:pictures and I understand he may have been in this signal corps unit that was attached to us. I don't really understand from Ms. Witt that there was a lot of signal corps personnel that brought these, a lot of these pictures back. But I never heard of any other person that made his own pictures like I did, like I developed myself.

LO: So this young man, he wasn't in your unit?

JN: He was in the over all unit, had to be close because he knew me...

LO: Right.

JN:and I knew him but I can't tell you what his name is.

LO: Yeah, yeah. So do you remember what his job was?

JN: No, not off-hand. I guess we had total, with the signal corps unit that was with us in, I guess we had four or five hundred men, I don't even know.

LO: Yes.

JN: All I know is what I had to do.

LO: Right, sure. Do you know if there was any response to, of any, on the part of anyone else to his taking these photos or if there were other people taking photos also?

JN: I don't remember seeing anybody. Now we didn't, where we were and all that we were not able to even have cameras, that I know of. Now, if somebody did, I didn't see it or know, and I don't remember anyone else in my outfit other than this one boy that had pictures. Now I know after my story went in the news, I joined with a friend from Sylacauga, Johnny Haines was his name, and he and I went all the way through together and come out together. And he passed away here a few years back and I got to go to his

funeral, but his wife called me after my story was in the paper and we had a long tearful cry over that, she did, but she was so proud that I had put that story in about us going through. Now he had spoken to her about going there but he didn't have any pictures or anything.

LO: What, after all these years, what spurred you on, you shared a little bit of this over the phone but I would like to put it on tape? What spurred you on to make these pictures available, to make your story more public?

JN: Well, I just had them so long and whether I face it or not I'm getting old--turn to go to heaven if you want to put it that way. And we don't have children and as it concerned me about what to do with them, and I just couldn't make myself throw them away, and Mrs. Elaine Witt I knew that she had written articles before concerning the Holocaust and really I called her to see if she could give me some organization that might want these. I didn't think about putting it in the paper but she did. And I said, well if you want to put it in the paper, it's alright with me but I still would like to give the pictures to somebody that would want them and could use them as a historical reference, and so that's what happened.

LO: Did, were you motivated at all by people who say that it didn't happen? That the Holocaust didn't happen?

JN: Oh, that's bugged me for years, every time some guy comes through either saying it didn't happen or it was exaggerated. In fact, I had just spoken with a woman down at the community center before I called Mrs. Witt, and she was speaking down there as a, one who came out of Germany during that time. I don't know if she was a German, or is Polish or some surrounding country, but she was telling about all of the horrors that she had to go through to get out down there, and I thought maybe she might be the one I could give the pictures to. And I talked to her and soon as I mentioned Buchenwald she said oh, well those things were exaggerated. Well I didn't get mad at her but I didn't give her my pictures either. [chuckle]

LO: [chuckle] Good for you. Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of camps?

JN: Ahh.

LO: Anyone that you knew?

JN: Not directly, I know there was a number of camps, but I never saw but just Buchenwald. I'm sure some of them were even worse than Buchenwald according to what I've heard since I got out, and, but I didn't know. Now this one boy at Battle of the Bulge Club that we belong to, he just said he was glad that he, that I put my story in the paper because it reminded him of going through and he went through the same camp that I did, although he wasn't in my outfit, he did go through Buchenwald, I don't know if he was a infantry man or what, but he said, he remembered the stench that I described and he said he hadn't thought of that in so long but he was so glad that I put all that in the paper, because he had never heard anybody mention that.

Tape one, side two:

LO: This is tape one, side two of an interview with Mr. Joe Nichols, Lois Olena interviewing. You were saying that this young man said that--now he's a part of this Battle of the Bulge Club here in Birmingham?

JN: Yes, yes.

LO: Do you remember his name?

JN: No, I don't.

LO: Do they meet regularly?

JN: We meet the third Monday of every month at the...

MN: Pioneer.

JN:Pioneer Cafeteria. I have lunch out there. I don't go very often.

LO: Yeah.

JN: For a long while I worked every Monday at the Golf Course so I couldn't.

LO: Okay. Did you have any idea of the number of camps or the number of prisoners in captivity, any concept when you saw what you saw, did you have at, like at what point were you aware of how astronomical this situation had been?

JN: When I saw the pictures, is when I saw the horror of it. As I was developing the pictures and as they would come up--I don't recall whether this soldier, friend, whoever he was, showed me his pictures or not, but it was all during that same time--I went right on into the darkroom with him and made my set...

LO: Yeah.

JN: ...of the pictures. And when I saw them coming up like that, I really got the full picture of how horrible that thing was.

LO: What was your emotional response? Was it overwhelming to see that?

JN: Well, I didn't, I don't recall like I said going through the war like we did, we were used to so much that the average person never sees, you know. We knew the horrors of war and all, but that was the first time I really saw such a terrible demonstration. All these pictures coming up like that. I had never seen a lot of dead people before because our army was very good. The only dead Germans I ever saw was bodies that they left, that had a bomb of some sort attached to them. They wouldn't, they had to have a bomb squad come in and remove that before they could take the body off and bury it, but as a whole, our army, they cleaned up as they went and buried, gave them a proper burial and all like that. They were very good at that. So I never did see a lot of dead people laying around, you know because I was in the back lines. I imagine the boys on the front lines, they saw lots of it.

LO: Yeah.

JN: But they also had their teams that had to clean it up and give them a proper burial.

LO: Just a couple more questions here. Was it, was it when you came to Buchenwald that you first understood about the gassing of Jews?

JN: Yes, that's the first time I had heard that, but they had, this was a machine. You know a lot of people, they blame Hitler with all that, but Hitler couldn't kill six million Jews.

LO: He needed some help.

JN: He needed lots of help. And then the thing about it, going through a war whenever you are killing people, the way I understand it, and I never did have to point my gun at anybody. I carried a gun the whole time and I thank the Lord I didn't have to, but going through all of that killing, killing, killing, you just kill for self survival, is all. They get that way and killing just, you're numb to it the way I understand it but that's the first I ever really had it hit me like it did. The real horrors of it like that.

LO: Just one last question, is there, if you could give any advice to the present generation and the next generation, those that are following you based on your experience in the war and Buchenwald, what would it be? What would you say?

JN: Well as far as war and what happens to it and all like that, do everything in your power to prevent it. I'm kind of like old Teddy Roosevelt was, walk softly but carry a big stick and hope you'll never have to use it. But the situation the way it is today, you can see we don't need to let our military go down. We don't need their morale to go down, they need to be sharp and love serving their country. I'm as patriotic as anybody ever has been. I love my country and I believe in taking care and holding your country up for everybody to envy as a democ--democratic organization, but we just must stay on top of the situation and not let someone like Hitler. That man could of went, won the whole world now. If we had been one year later getting over there, there's no telling how long we would have had to fight. Because he was already well advanced in the making of an atomic bomb. He had jet aircraft, which we didn't have. I never will forget the first one I ever saw. It wasn't going but 450 miles an hour, but ours wouldn't do 200, so that was fast. And then he was far advanced and he made a mistake. He won France and was sitting right on the coast of France, he had all of France conquered and rather than go in and try to take England, he sent half of his army towards Russia and that was the biggest mistake he ever made.

LO: Good thing for everybody else.

JN: I thank the Lord that he did because it would of taken years to overcome that man. I don't know--I did in the newspaper article--I told about my radar outfit, we plotted the first B-2 bomb that he sent up, that was the 70 miles high and all like that. He had all that down. We, in, on Christmas Day of 1944 and my other half of my outfit at Liège, Belgium, he threw in over a 100 buzz bombs. Now this wasn't a thing in the world but a 500 pound bomb, I think, with wings and a motor, and they'd point that thing towards a target, a city, and when it ran out of gas, it fell. And on Christmas Day they had over a 100 buzz bombs to hit in the city of Liège on that one day and that man, if we had a been

a year later getting over there, there ain't no telling how long that mess would have lasted because we couldn't afford to let him win. That's all there is to it.

LO: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

JN: That just about covers it.

LO: Okay. Well I just want to personally thank you for all that you did in your part. My grandfather was in the Pacific, the South Pacific near Okinawa and I never take for granted with all the, over 500 interviews that I've heard and listened to, I never take for granted the price that was paid and what you all did, and so we want to thank you and I want to thank you on behalf of the archive too. I know that your testimony will be an important addition to their archive there and if we can manage to, if we arrange to get a copy of the pictures, that way will be better, I'm going to be working on that. Thank you.

JN: You mean, get a copy of those that I gave?

LO: Yeah.

JN: Well I'm sure that Mrs. Miller over there would let you make some copies. This Wolf, you know where Wolf's is down here?

LO: Yes.

JN: I made a copy for Miss Witt's aunt. It cost me 46 bucks but I wanted to do it...

LO: Yeah, right.

JN: ...because she was so nice.

LO: I plan to and the archive, they said that they would pay for that and so...

MN: Well if you copy the pictures that Miss Witt's aunt got, they'd be better than those others...

JN: And it was cleaned new pictures come out. Actually looks better than the one I had because mine's old and yellow and all that but they, they told me, she told me, said why people that put these in the paper, these are in remarkable condition. Well, I just had them put up, you know all these years.

LO: Do you know what kind of camera he used to take the pictures?

JN: I would, it was 35mm I'm sure.....

LO: Yeah.

JN:but I couldn't, it was small negatives so I'm sure it was 35mm.

LO: Well thank you very much.

JN: All right. Well I appreciate your interest in it because my only purpose is you know, to do something to help prevent that mess from ever happening again.

LO: Thank you.

*Addendum:*¹

This is an addendum I want to add to my statement I gave to you regarding my experiences leading up to my entrance into Germany and subsequently on to the concentration camp of Buchenwald.

On December 16, 1944, the Germans made a tremendous breakthrough which we now know as the Battle of the Bulge.

On that first day my half of our outfit moved back to Charleroi, (Belgium or France - I've forgotten), a distance of eighty miles from Verviers, Belgium where we were.

On my first morning in Charleroi, I was on the *Autobahn* looking towards Germany and I saw ambulances lined up bumper to bumper going and coming, as far as the eye could see.

I knew from this that we were taking tremendous casualties possibly the greatest amount since the landing on "D" day.

I thought you might want to add this to the statement I've already given.

Thank you sincerely,
Joel C. Nichols

By the way my spec # is 14078722
I still remember that after 55 years.

¹This addendum was written by Joel C. Nichols immediately after the audio interview.