

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JAMES A. REALEY

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: March 16, 1988

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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JR - James A. Realey [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: March 16, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing James A. Realey. The date is March 16, 1988. Jim, can you please tell me where in Europe, and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

JR: It was southern Germany, in the Munich area. I was with the 283rd Field Artillery Battalion at the time.

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

JR: Not at all.

PS: Before you arrived at the camp, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews and political prisoners in Europe? If so, can you please describe what you knew?

JR: Very little. The combatants information of that sort wasn't readily available.

PS: Can you please give the name of the camp that you liberated, and its location? Also, the date, if possible, when you arrived at the camp site?

JR: The camp was Dachau, which is north and west of Munich, the date, I believe, was the last of June or the first of May. I am very undecided as to exact date.

PS: So...

JR: Year 1945.

PS: 1945.

JR: '44, '45, excuse me.

PS: Right. And the date again was...

JR: Last of June, first of May.

PS: The last of April?

JR: Last of April, yeah.

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

JR: Originally our group went past the camp, and set up a perimeter of resistance at, past Dachau. I and two other, or three other men went back to the camp to see if we could be of any assistance. Originally when we walked in, we saw prisoners in prison garbs, the striped white and black uniforms. And they were elated at the, as the Americans had passed through the camp. And as we looked further on we found massive graves, huge piles of very emaciated bodies. We found the crematoriums, the showers supposedly, the gas chambers, etc. And the feeling was disbelief at the time, almost as if this really wasn't happening at all. But complete disgust at what we had seen.

PS: When you entered the camp, were there any German prison guards or SS still within the camp?

JR: I myself did not see any. Having bypassed the camp initially as we moved to, up to the front lines, I was told there was a few left that were taken prisoner immediately by some of the infantry troops that went into the camp physically the first, at first. I did not see anyone. They said there was a few SS guards that were left.

PS: You entered the camp, you say, the day after the actual liberation?

JR: We were traveling close by with the elements of an infantry battalion. We moved past the camp initially and set up a defense line. And then I came back, which would be maybe three, four hours after the camp physically had been liberated.

PS: So you were really one of the first eyewitnesses to the liberation of...

JR: I would...

PS: ...Dachau?

JR: ...imagine as such.

PS: As one of the first, can you estimate approximately how many prisoners there were, if any were dead, and if you were able to save any that were near death?

JR: An estimation of those dead was virtually impossible. Two reasons: the bodies were so terribly emaciated that, and so small because of the lack of body flesh that it was hard to tell in a pile of bodies exactly how many would be in it. The rooms, hoppers of bone dust, it's just impossible to relate how many bodies had already been cremated. Of the prisoners that were in the hospital area and that were still alive, of which there were very few, most of them were in a condition where they could not be fed. We were told by medical people not to give them rations of any sort because their stomachs could not tolerate our food at that time, and they would have to be fed very, very gingerly. Because those who tried to eat C-rations, etc., that were given them initially just brought it all up. They could, their stomach couldn't tolerate the food.

PS: Do you know if this camp, Dachau, was set up as a mixed camp, or if it was a camp that was set up for Jews strictly?

JR: No. There were several, in fact there were many various nationalities. Jews were one of several groups. There were Poles, there were Czechs, there were Germans, Austrians. Because of that we did have some problem with being able to speak to them, because not being bilingual, we oftentimes could not understand the prisoners at all. Those that could speak to us at all. Some were too weak to even speak.

PS: And the nationality groups you'd say were pretty well mixed.

JR: Very much of a mix.

PS: Were there any children? Did you see any children?

JR: Not at that time but in the piles of clothing near the crematory there were children's clothing there. But I did not see any children at the time.

PS: You saw none who were living.

JR: Not, to my, the best of my recollection.

PS: Had you been assigned any responsibilities in arranging for the transfer or care of the prisoners?

JR: No, none at all. I was totally a spectator. We had come back that way to go back to a previous location with our outfit and stopped to see whether we could be of any help. So I had no function, cleanup or otherwise, at the camp.

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

JR: Total euphoria, I suppose, but some were able to show you some appreciation. This had, this we were seeing all through France and various other communities and were sort of used to that. And then some they were--the very ill, could only smile or just show their appreciation by trying to grasp your hand. But it wasn't a time of celebration by any means.

PS: Did you and your outfit, your unit, come to this prison camp, Dachau, prepared with food and any medical supplies?

JR: The second day I came back we were then told about the rations, the fact that we should not try to feed them. Those people in there that were then well situated, medical people from the army, had been well supplied with medical facilities and were able to tend them best. So we did not make any effort to encroach on them at all.

PS: The medical treatment, were they mostly say from the medical officers and medical aid men within your own division, or were they then prepared to deal, do you think, by sending special medical battalions out?

JR: I would be really unable to say, because of the day-and-a-half or two days we were in the area, our outfit was told to move on the second day some time just around noon. We then left Dachau, the few of us. They had been taking some pictures. And rejoined our unit and we were gone. So we were not there any particularly long time.

PS: Did the experience of seeing the prisoners have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Nazi Germany?

JR: After having been in the Bulge area and having heard what happened at Malmédy and a few other places, I think our emotions were fairly well fixed. But, it is an experience--and I was about 19 or 20 years old at the time--it is an experience which is never to be forgotten.

PS: Now, can you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? Did you talk with them afterwards about what all of you had experienced?

JR: Of the three or four of us that went back on the two different days, it was a highly emotional experience. The men I was with at the time, who had seen combat for some months. We were very strong people, but we cried openly at that time.

PS: You remained in the camp for a little while. Now, did your experience linger long after you left the camp?

JR: It's never really left.

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

JR: In many ways. I realized that the Germans were at fault in this particular instance, but I also feel that under similar circumstances, it can happen anywhere. And so we must be totally on guard for that.

PS: Now, when you entered Dachau, and you saw the results of the just unspeakable inhumanities of the, the [tape off then on; no talking; tape off then on again]

JR: We had heard that there were many camps. Concentration camps to us were primarily the place to hold prisoners. But we weren't aware of the vast elimination camps that were later found.

PS: In your own mind, Jim, can you explain German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

JR: It's hard to relate, I suppose, but, because it's political and it's emotional. But, I do think that in defense of Hitler and the Hitler regime at the time, they were looking for a solution for the Jewish problem primarily. They did make some effort to export some of these people to various countries, some of which would not accept these refugees. They housed them for a good, long period of time in prisons and they realized that this was not working. And when they decided to eliminate these vast numbers I have no idea. But there were some efforts made to cope with the Jewish problem as they stated it. This, I think, was the last resort. And once started it was, it snowballed as far as eliminating these people.

PS: Yeah, of course that spilled over into people certainly of other religions. I think the figures after the, following the Holocaust were that approximately six million Jewish people were exterminated, and about six million non-Jews, and from different nationalities, which also makes a lot of, caused a lot of thinking about what could have initiated, perpetrated thinking that certainly never before has been experienced, you know, in world history. Is there anything that you can think of that could have brought this to such a tremendous scale?

JR: I think you have to realize that most of these camps were run by their SS troops, which were supposedly the elite of the Germany Army. These people, along with the Stormtroopers, etc., were the problem solvers for Hitler. They received this problem in their eyes that they could not house these people in internment camps and would have to come up with another solution. As terrible as it was, it was terribly efficient. I'm not sure that the figure of 12 million is anywhere near as accurate as it could be. I have no way of determining the numbers of bodies that were buried in open graves, miles of them. How many people, how much bone dust consequently, measures into one single human being. So the figure of 12 million probably is very much on the small side.

PS: You actually think that 12 million is understated?

JR: I would rather think so. I...

PS: Oh.

JR: And, as, you know, the shock value of this is just overwhelming. I'm not even all that happy about relating all this today. It brings back too many very difficult emotional feelings that I had hoped to rather suppress. And certainly, in the position I was

in when I first saw this camp, I was not adequately informed as to how you're making any determination on numbers of people. It was such a ghastly thing that the shock was overwhelming. Though, but I do feel that the numbers are rather on the low side. We shall probably never know the true number.

PS: Jim, after you left the camp, were there any official or unofficial meetings of your unit to discuss what you had experienced at the camp, and do you know if there was a regimental history that included this experience?

JR: I don't believe there was ever any official or unofficial meetings as such. Those of us who were there related what we saw to our fellow comrades. And that was about the extent of it. It's, was somewhat like telling any other experience during a war and many of them are unbelievably. And really, to try to relate to anyone the feelings or the emotions or what actually we saw, to verbalize this is extremely difficult. And I have made no effort to do so because in many cases I don't think it can really be believed.

PS: You say until you actually saw Dachau that you had not heard anything of the gassing of prisoners in concentration camps?

JR: Most of the information I ultimately received about what had gone on came later. Some of this information we did extract from some of the prisoners that we could speak to. I could speak a little German, and they showed us what the showers were used for, which were really the gas chambers.¹ And up to that point I had no idea what was happening. I had never even remotely seen a crematory. You must remember I was only about 19 years old. And although I don't feel sheltered I certainly, I don't think anyone has ever seen anything quite, this extensive or this brutal.

PS: This might relate somewhat to a question I previously asked you. But do you think that you, that you would have had the same feelings if you had not been an eye witness to the Nazi atrocities of the Holocaust?

JR: No. I doubt whether, even the other men in our unit that hadn't seen this physically, would find it hard to relate to, it's one of the sort of things that you must have seen it. Certainly, you can empathize with these people in what had gone on. And it's hard not to show some emotion whenever you hear these figures and see the terrible things that went on. But, to be there, it's somewhat like a scar. It always remains.

PS: Jim, how long did you remain in Europe after the war?

JR: After the war ended in the first part of May, our unit ran a German prison camp for a period of time in Munich. And we remained in Germany with a military government for a while. And we left through Marseilles, France. And we got home February of 1946.

PS: Jim, after responding so well to all the questions I've asked you, is there anything at all that you would like to add to your testimony?

¹ According to the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. 1, in Dachau there was no mass extermination program with poison gas. There was a crematorium. (pp.340-341) In 1942 a gas chamber was built, but it was not put into use. (p.342)

JR: I suppose there's a great deal that could be said. There is so much feeling and so much emotion involved with this and all the things that happen to young people, experience these sort of things, I had had hoped then and I still do--unfortunately it hasn't worked out--that other young men would never have to go through this themselves. I know, I have two sons, and certainly I hope they never have to see something as ghastly as this.

PS: Jim, I thank you very much. On behalf of the Gratz College Oral History Archive of the Holocaust, and again, this was James A. Realey, interviewed by Phil Solomon on March 16, 1988. Jim we thank you very, very much.