

Nathan Schaeffer

00:00:51

>> Interviewer: All right. Can you give me your full name and where you were born? And then tell me something about your pre-war life.

>> Schaeffer: Okay. That's all. All right. I just didn't know where you were starting.

>> Interviewer: Oh, they're starting. Give it to me now.

>> Schaeffer: Oh, is that -- oh. My name is Nathan Schaeffer.

>> Interviewer: You were born --

>> Schaeffer: And I was born in New York City, where I -- till about the age of seven, when we moved into East Bronx, where I grew up until we were married.

>> Interviewer: And tell me when were you -- go in to service, Armed Forces, and where?

>> Schaeffer: I entered the Armed Forces 1942.

>> Interviewer: How old were you then?

>> Schaeffer: I was 20 years old, and it's very cute. I was drafted, but just the opposite of what people think. The draft notice was not a harsh letter. In fact, it was an invitation, like they wrote it, that you've been honored and you've been invited to join the Armed Forces and that it was an honor and a privilege to serve your country. And we of the Jewish faith were very proud of that. In fact, we looked forward to it. An example of that, in my family, we had 14 male adults of military age, and all 14 did serve. One did not return, and one returned a little bit shell-shocked and all, but all in all, most of us we find in the New York City area did serve their country well.

>> Interviewer: And what part of the Armed Forces were you in?

>> Schaeffer: I joined with the U. S. Army at that time, and we were taken to Fort Kilmer, where I was assigned to the combat engineers, and we took our basic training up in Fort Devens, Mass., in '42 and '43.

>> Interviewer: And from there?

>> Schaeffer: In mid-'43 we were transferred to West Virginia Mountains where -- I have a little picture here. This is me in somewhere in the middle of '43 in the West Virginia mountains in the mountain uniforms. And this is a picture I took --

>> Interviewer: Look at me.

>> Schaeffer: -- of me. This is a picture I took of me when I was in service about four months. I'd come home for my first leave right after basic training.

>> Interviewer: Keep looking at me.

>> Schaeffer: Yeah. And after West Virginia, we went back to Fort Devens, where I was assigned to a cadre, made my first stripes and all, and we were transferred to Camp Butner in Durham, North Carolina. From there, Durham, in 1943, we were sent up to Fort Dix. From there we went overseas.

>> Interviewer: Where did you serve overseas?

>> Schaeffer: We served in England, Germany, France, and Switzerland -- not Switzerland. I'm sorry. That was my -- recreation was Switzerland. Germany and Austria.

>> Interviewer: And when you were in Germany, when did you first go into the concentration camps?

>> Schaeffer: We ran into the concentration camps in early April, 1945. It was somewhere around April 8th, 9th, or 10th. I'm not sure of the exact date, but between April 8th and April 10th of 1945 is when we entered Buchenwald. It was maybe the second or third day after the actual liberation.

My thoughts of the concentration camp was -- and you know, the word was at that time that the German people did not know what was going on in the concentration camps, the world did not know, and yet, what stands out most of anything of the entering the area of the concentration camp was, I would say approximately 5 to 10 miles away from the road, the special road that was built leading to the concentration camp, there was a terrible odor. And I remember -- one of the things I remember today was, we did not have gas masks, and because of the experience of the recent desert war, they're talking about gas. It reminded me of those days. Immediately the odor was so strong of rotting flesh, of dead animals, like you smell a dead animal. This is what the odor was for these 5 to 10 miles. I would say it was at least a 30-minute trip going very slow because our driver did not know where he was going or what was happening, what was this odor. We were afraid to move too fast. And the odor was so bad that we took out handkerchiefs and held it over our noses. We couldn't breathe, and how the people could even suggest that they didn't know what was going on, the odor had to tell them something was going on. Why they didn't ask...

Finally we reached the concentration camp, and there we saw these big wire fences around, the machine guard posts at each side of the gates and all, which were not occupied. And the first thing that we would run into when we entered the camp was this. This is a wagon. I would say it was approximately 300, 400 hundred bodies, several hundreds of bodies -- there was no way of counting them -- just piled on this one tiny wagon, ready to be burned up in the furnaces. That was on the -- excuse me. That was on the right side of the gates as we entered. On the left side of the gates was a low two-story building, which we were not allowed to enter because they had a guard on it. It was some sort of medical facility, but looking through the windows -- and a couple of windows, we had a couple of young children, ages unknown, unable to -- but their eyes were bigger than their

faces. They were, like, popping out. Their faces were distorted, looking into nowhere, a terrible sight.

What were our feelings then? Like many people had asked me back in the -- '46 is when we came home -- '45, later on in '45 when we came home, and '46 -- what did you feel like? How would a 22-year-old boy know what he felt like? To me, I saw kids. They looked sick. I did not realize then or did not know then that they were made this way, they were experimented on. To us, they were just sick kids. And when we saw these bodies piled up, you know, it did not sink in that, you know, these were living human beings who were murdered, massacred, just because they did not -- belonged to either different faiths or minorities or whatever they were. This was mostly a Jewish concentration camp. You could say 95 percent of the inmates there were Jewish. And being a Jew myself, it just didn't sink in to me that this is what is happening to my people. You know, I didn't know it. Then right behind the wagon, I come across this pile here. What is this pile? To me, it looked like little stones or little dust until an officer come over to me and said to me, "Sergeant, don't you know what that is?" I said, "Really? What is it?" He said, "Those are human bones. Those are the ashes from the furnace."

Now, I had pictures of the furnace because right around the corner, we went in the building, and we had these flat stone stretchers, what they call, which they just pushed into the furnace. And I had taken pictures of partially burned bodies on these furnaces. I took pictures of inside the furnace of remains of bodies in there, but in the early 1950s, I had gone through several years of depressions that was keeping me awake. The -- they were -- I would wake up at 3:00 in the morning, all of a sudden start thinking that, you know, here I went to a concentration camp, saw my people all burned up and killed and murdered and massacred, and it did not sink in what had happened for days and days and days later. My conscience bothered me. So in a fit of depression in the early 1950s, I did destroy many of those, really, pictures which I would love I had today. I also

do have the original Star of David little sign that all the Jews had to wear, which I forgot to bring with me today, which I will mail up to the studio here so they can show it on TV if possible.

As we walked down the walk into the concentration camp, this is a picture of little huts. Now, when the inmates lived in these little huts, they knew that they were not ready for the furnace. They were in what they called the labor group or the labor corps or whatever it was. They did the work around the area. There again, how could the citizens of Germany in those days deny that they know it? These prisoners did go out, and they were thin. I can't tell you how thin they were. They were not fed. They did not eat. And they did all the work. Then, when they were finished with the -- after about three months, they were finished. They couldn't do anymore work. Then they were transferred to the buildings where the -- they only slept on wooden slats, and each -- there would be approximately 2- or 3-foot space between each slat, piled up about 10 high, and there they stood for 24 hours from where they were pulled out and then taken right over to the furnaces, which was about a block and a half away.

Here is a picture here of two inmates. The smaller one which you see there, I took with me for several hours, and I fed him and all. Now, he was no more than about 4 feet tall, and he had been in the concentration camp a couple of years, and he was about 18 years old, but he never grew over this 4 feet.

what was the feeling of the most soldiers? They -- I could tell you, everybody felt sorry because whatever we had in our pockets, candy bars -- we cleaned out our trucks. We had a few tanks with us who had boxes of K-ration foods and chocolate candies and gum. They didn't know what gum was. I remember that they threw the gum away. A couple of them chewed on it, tried to swallow it, and started to choke on it. But the chocolate bars

and all, it was like, you know, something they had never seen, never realized what it was.

what else do I remember? Dinnertime, we were fed -- you know, our cooking kitchens and all would cook us food, and we had our little K-ration cooking pans and all, and the inmates of the concentration camp, they would pile around -- not around the kitchens. We wanted to give them our good food. We wanted them to eat with us. No, they wouldn't eat with us. To them, to eat with us was something that they -- somehow, they felt they didn't deserve it. Instead, they went to the garbage cans, and they would rather eat out of a garbage can than eat with us. And this did not sink in to me, another thing why it bothered me for all those years. It didn't hurt me at that time that they ate out of the garbage cans. In fact, a couple of times, I tried to push them away from the garbage can to bring them to the kitchen to give them fresh food, not what we're throwing away. No, no, no, they'd rather eat out of the garbage can because they figured out of the garbage can, they got all they wanted. Nobody stopped them, where, if they went to the kitchen, maybe the people and boss -- in other words, the sergeants there would not give them as much as they would want. The fear of the superiors was so installed in them. You know, it had to take me months before I realized why they wouldn't eat with us. It was a terrible thing.

But -- oh, several days, about a week, 10 days later -- it's hard for me to remember time, space, running around, doing our job, what we had to do. But a week or two later, I had to go back to see what was going on, and here, I went into Buchenwald again, and there I saw that some of the same people who I met before, they were lined up, and they already got their examinations and all, and they were put on GI trucks and all, and they were being moved to the displaced persons camps, where they were then taken care of after that.

when we left Buchenwald, as bad as Buchenwald, we now go into the Ohrdruf concentration camp. This is Ohrdruf concentration camp, and I wish you could have a better picture of this. Ohrdruf concentration camp was a labor camp where you worked until you died or, if you ever decided -- we were told later on that if an inmate wanted to take a 5-minute rest, he didn't get a 5-minute rest. They would shoot him right in the head. No inmate was allowed a rest. But they were not allowed to transfer the dead bodies over to Buchenwald because Buchenwald had its own.

Here's another picture of what they did with the dead bodies of, what I'd say, 95 percent of these were Jewish people. They would lay the dead bodies on the ground, and on top of the dead bodies, they would put wood, then another line of dead bodies. I would say 50, 60 bodies in a line, something like that. We couldn't count them because they was all black and all burned up when we saw them. And like that, they would have four or five lines of bodies with wood in between, and on top of that, they would put a railroad tier so that will keep the bodies or wood from flying up or something like that. We were never explained why the railroad tiers were put on the top. And then they would set the wood on fire, and this is how they got rid of the bodies there. They would burn them up. Then when they burned them up, they would put them in lime pits. These were -- oh, lined with lime or something like that for the odor, trying to kill the odor of the dead bodies. And here is a large lime pit where bodies were thrown in and all, just on one pile, and on top of that some kind of lime was put, and then an inmate would cover it up and all.

And here was a fire in this Ohrdruf concentration camp. It was said the fire was set by ex-inmates who, out of anger and all -- we couldn't blame them. Our hearts went out to them, and what else could I say. It was just -- it was just a terrible feeling and all.

>> Interviewer: And was -- you went to the labor camp. You went to Buchenwald. How about Weimar?

>> Schaeffer: And Weimar was more of a -- those who went to Weimar already were picked laborers, picked prisoners, really. I did not see anything bad. Those who went to Weimar were privileged prisoners. They either worked in factories that were needed or they worked in the mill of something like that, and as long as they behaved, they stood there. Years later, thinking about it, I honestly believe that the Weimar places where we were were put up strictly for the -- to fool the Red Cross coming in and making them think that the prisoners were treated right. And Weimar was far enough away, a few miles, anywhere from 10 to 15, 20 miles away, that no odor could come out, or there was no way that anybody visiting could know of what was going on just a few miles back. So Weimar really was a cover-up for really what was going on.

>> Interviewer: When you returned to the States after the war, what was the reaction of your friends and relatives?

>> Schaeffer: When we got back, the pictures already had all been shown in the newspapers and all, and the shock was already -- it was over, the shock of what was going on. The outrage was there, and they would ask me, "Well, what did they look like? How did they look like?" which I tried to explain. Then again, you know, you ask all the soldiers of Vietnam, how did it feel like, going around, living in Vietnam and finding there the problems they had, the troubles they had, or in the desert war, the troubles they had, or in even Korea. You know, you could talk years later of war, and unless you could actually smell the odor of dead bodies, the smelly odor of rotting flesh, it's so hard to describe the horror, the horror those concentration camps were because there was no battlefield that even smelled or looked like what a concentration camp looked like. It was really a most terrifying experience.

when we got back, like all U. S. citizens, we were very happy to serve our country. We were very happy that we were successful. We were very happy that we -- that all who did come back did come back. And even today, I could think of a few of my friends who we left behind who were really good friends at the time. And what else can I say? All I can say is that we, in the United States here, must at all expenses, that no matter what, we must record what went on in the concentration camps so that never again in the history of mankind can any country or individual or organization, even the rightist groups of America who think and deny that Germany ever had a Holocaust -- first they cried there was no such a Holocaust. Then when we brought up the evidence and they saw that we had the evidence that a Holocaust did happen, now they say, "Yes, Germany only killed 90,000, 80,000 inmates, that's all, and in a war where 12 million people were killed, 90,000 civilians are murdered, big deal." But now we must prove to the world, and we must record it in our books, textbooks. We must teach it in schools that there was a Holocaust, it did happen, and if we allow people, these neo-Nazi groups or these fascist groups and these communist groups -- that they should record so none of this ever happens again.

>> Interviewer: Did you talk to any of the German civilians while you were there?

>> Schaeffer: Oh, I spoke to many German civilians, and this is what I said before. How could they deny that they didn't know something was going on at the concentration camps because we knew something was wrong 10 miles, approximately 10 miles before the concentrations camps. We blamed it on gas that the odor was so bad. They had to smell it. And we went around, all around Germany and all, and we lived in their homes. We lived in the little towns and all, and you know, in the less than a year that I lived in Germany, and wherever we went, never, never found the Nazis. Now, we did catch a few prisoners, but they were soldiers. Except for the SS troops, I always felt sorry for the, just the normal soldier, and all he did was the fighting. It's

the specialized SS troops who were doing all these terrible, terrible massacres and murders throughout Europe. And by the way, being Jewish, I mentioned Jewish, but you know, you went all around Europe. They did it to every religious group. They were anti-religion. They did it to the Catholics. They did it to the Protestants. They did it to the Jews. They did it to everybody. If you were not a German, if you were not a true German, then you belonged to the concentration camp.

>> Interviewer: Very good.

>> Schaeffer: But unless something else comes to my mind, it's hard for me to talk. That's it? Are we finished?

00:43:10