Melwood Van Scoyoc, Liberator, 11/10/1987

Interview conducted by Harry Rosenberg for the National Council of Jewish Women, Sarasota, Florida

Q: What branch of the military service were you in?

A: I was in the headquarters of the 20th Corps.

Q: I see. And the location of the unit at the time the war ended?

A: We were down in Austria. Krensmunster, Austria.

Q: Which camp was it that you liberated?

A: The Ordruff. I didn’t liberate it personally, but I was in Corps headquarters. I was a captain, and this camp was known as Ordruff, and it’s…there’s just not tee much about it here.

Q: It was located in?

A: In Germany. Not too far from Weimar.

Q: I see.

A: Exactly. That’s where the Fourth Army wound up there.

Q: Uh, hum. And did you have…any of your people…

A: Our troops assigned to the 20th Corps were the ones who liberated this camp, and after it was liberated, immediately after, one of the Corp’s officers went to that camp to look at it and see what it looked like, because it was the first camp that had been overrun by American troops.

Q: I see.

A: And, for that reason, General Eisenhower and Patton and a lot of other dignitaries came to look—that’s what these pictures are about here.,,

Q: I see. I see that. Yes, yes. Did you have any prior knowledge at all of the condition of the camps?

A: No, I don’t think anybody knew anything about this camp until we came on it. Right after the camp was overrun, I wrote a letter to my father and sent copies to a number of other friends and, ..the carbon..it’s probably not too easy to read—it’s the only copy I have now—and, I think you might want to have a copy made of that. Now, that describes my view of what the camp looked like, what had gone on there, so far as the information I could gather from…actually, there were two or three, as I recall, survivors. When the time came to evacuate the camp—they wanted to get these prisoners out of there before the American troops came—there were two or three of them hid up in the rafters, and, did not get out, were forced to leave. And they provided some of the information about the camp—what had gone on there—but, and so, what I describe there is mostly my own eyesight plus a few comments that we heard from the survivors. Would you like me to read that to you?

Q: If you would like to. Otherwise, I would read it. If you care to, I would rather have it in your voice.

A: O.K.

Q: It’s probably a very interesting document, and if you will allow us a copy, I’ll have one made and bring it back to you.

A: this is a letter dated 12 April 1945, written in our headquarters near Weimar, Germany. And, I wrote this letter to my father and gave copies to a few of my friends in the States. The letter starts.

“I saw death today. This is not the first time in this war that I have done so. But this was a different kind of death, caused by malnutrition, beating, hanging and torture. Nothing but plain murder on a wholesale basis. The scene was a concentration camp at Ordruff. Stories about it have appeared in Stars and Stripes and in the U.S. papers. Words, however, cannot adequately describe the horror as seen by the human eye. Perhaps the photographs that were taken will help. The victims of the Nazi systemic-sized..systematized extermination program were Russians, Poles, Jews and other unfortunates who fell into the clutches of these beasts. It is rumored that some American flying personnel were among those in the camp, but the truth of this will not probably ever by known.

Just inside the entrance to this hell-hole, about 30 men lay sprawled on the ground, dead, shot by their guards shortly before out troops arrived. Some were nude, others covered by thin and ragged clothes. All showed the unmistakable signs of starvation—pipe-stem limbs, protruding bones, and wasted flesh. Death, even by shooting, would probably have been a relief from the inevitable death by slow starvation and beatings. If they had a chance to live, it was denied at the last minute, sadistic manifestations of their captors.

Survivors who had hid, said that those who were shot were too weak to march to another camp when it was decided to move the prisoners due to the approaching American troops. Nearby was the gallows. A very simple thing. It could take the lives of two human beings at the same time. The guards had only to kick the board out from under their feet. The drop was too short to break their necks. They strangled to death.

At least five died that way every day. It was a spectacle that the other prisoners were forced to watch. It was the penalty for talking back to a guard or complaining about their treatment. It is estimated that within the last five months, at least two thousand died or were killed at this place. That would be a lot of graves. Therefore, with characteristic German efficiency, ceremation [cremation] method was used. It was simple to do. Alternate layers of bodies and wood were piled across narrow gauge railroad rails and set afire.

After the bodies were reduced to ashes, or to hardly recognizable remains of the human anatomy, they were thrown into a huge pit and covered with a layer of dirt. The results of the last cremation were plainly visible. Scattered among the partially burned legs were the charred remains of human bodies, torsos, skulls and limbs—a sight I will never forget.

It wasn’t the practice, apparently, to cremate every day. A concrete building was used as a temporary resting place. Here the bodies were stripped and piled up like cordwood. It seems incomprehensible, but 40 bodies were there, stone dead, stacked four high and sprinkled with lime. All were similar to the bodies previously described. Some of them appeared to have been terribly beaten, but others had the purple faces produced by strangulation.

I looked into the vermin-infested buildings where these poor unfortunates lived. They were a one-story, frame construction with concrete floors. Spread all over the floors, except for a narrow center aisle, were straw mattresses. That was all there was to it. A place of indescribable filth and evil smells.

The camp is located about a mile from the town of Ordruff. It is surrounded by a double barbed-wire fence, about 12 feet high. Guard towers are at every corner. There was no escape. The food was insufficient to keep the inmates healthy enough to keep on working. If they were not able to work, they were killed. Death was inevitable, but they had a will to live., I read the story of Majdanek and the Nazi murder factory in Poland, as well as Jan Karosky’s Secret State.

Yet, it was impossible for me to fully accept the stories as 100% true. It just didn’t seem possible that human beings in this age could sink so low. I am now convinced. I saw it with my own eyes. The evidence was clear and unmistakable. The townspeople professed to know nothing of what went on at this camp. On individual had the nerve to say that Adolf Hitler would not have liked it. How eager are they now to disown relationships with the Nazi party, the S.S. and other organizations that supported Hitler! Anything to avoid responsibility for the acts of the government they supported and cheered these post years…these past years. We cannot let ourselves be misled by this sudden show of brotherly love and disavowal of the most infamous crimes. The German people must be made to realize, for several generations at least, the crime which they committed against the world. There should be no easy way out for them.”

Q: That tells it all.

A: The..Commanding General Walker of the 20th Corps made all the people of Ordruff come out and see this camp. He marched them all out and back home again, and made them take the whole thing in.

Q: I see. I see.

A: Now, I have some slides and if you would like to view them.

Q: I certainly would.

A: I can put them in that viewer and get a better…get it turned backwards for you…oops, excuse me. There we are. If you turn it towards the light, you can probably…You should raise these.

Q: Let me just…while we are doing this, I’ll shut this off…

A: Clean up, clean them out of that concrete room, stretch them out on the ground, and then dig the graves.

Q: Horrible. The Americans…

A: Our troops made the Germans…took the German prisoners that they had captured…and made them clean up this thing.

Q: Well, your reaction and your letter certainly tells how you felt about it.

A: Yes, and I am sure that all of those American troops who saw this thing felt the same way.

Q: Did you ever meet any of the people again? Did you have any contact with them?

A: No, I never had any contact with any of the…any of the people who escaped. I think the Army records probably have all of that somewhere.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: In the archives

Q: Yes. Well, the Germans kept very impeccable records.

A: O, yes they did. They sure did. I ran onto quite a few of those. Over there.

Q: Yes. And from there you went further.

A: Yes, we went from there to Austria. When the war ended.

Q: Do you feel that sort of thing could ever happen again?

A: Well, yes, I think so. I think it could on certain..under some conditions..I wouldn’t expect any of the major powers, like the United States or Russia, Germany or any of those countries over there. It can probably get to somewhere where there is some dictator that would go through similar stuff. Not probably to the extent of this. This was a tremendous thing that they did – to get rid of the Jews and others that they didn’t like.

Q: Well, it was an organized genocide.

A: Yes, an organized genocide. There’s no doubt about it.

Q: You express this awfully well in that letter, of course. And, uh….but a lot of things happened afterwards that, for us, for instance, we were always thinking that our people would come back, you know, but they didn’t…We didn’t know here, either, I presume. I don’t know how much the government knew about that – England, France, the United States…but, uh…

A: Well, I have been disappointed that our government, in those years right after the war, didn’t do more. I think they—there is an element in the Army—they didn’t like Hitler, of course, but they hated Communism so much that they kind of took the part of some of the Nazis and those that they wanted to bring over here and help us in the nuclear things, scientists and all those sort of people, and, uh, there wasn’t enough screening done, and I am sure a lot of criminals who should have been tried, like this one they are trying over in Israel, should have been tried too for war crimes.

Q: Well, this Klaus Barbey [spelling?], of course, we held him. This guy in Israel, of course, claims he is not the guy, but at this stage, I am sure something. But, I appreciate your saying that. We went on to the next thing kind of quickly, and our differences with the Russians right afterwards.

A: That was most unfortunate.

Q: And, then, of course, again, speaking out of the Jewish point of view, they didn’t let too many in anywhere, including Palestine at the time.

A: that’s right.

Q: Of the survivors.. But I would be interested in other experiences that you had felt…

A: Well, this is really the only experience that I had along this line of seeing what went on. I didn’t get up to Buchenwald, which is sort of north of Weimark.

Q: Well, I spent last night socially in the evening with a fellow who was with Patton and went to Weimark and was stationed in that area.

A: We didn’t spend much time there. We went on to Austria, and I don’t know if the occupation troops were in there and took over. And, uh..

Q: This book was published by your [blank space] Corps.

A: Yes, that’s right.

Q: It’s a nice memorabilia.

A: Yes, it is. I don’t know whether there is a date in there of publication or not. It was printed over in Japan, I am sure, because General Walker was in charge of our armies in Japan for a while until he was killed in an automobile accident over there.

Q: I remember him because I served in the Pacific in the Navy. How did you feel about Austria? Of course, they…

A: Well, we didn’t..I don’t have any feelings about Austria. Really, we were not there too long. We didn’t..our contact with the population of Austria was very meager. And, uh, I can’t…there is nothing I can say about Austria or its government. Of course, they were taken over by the Nazis, and I imagine there were maybe concentration camps there. I don’t know. I don’t remember hearing about it.

Q: No, I don’t think so.

A: Rut, the present premier..

Q: The President.

A: The President of Austria. I think he was probably just as guilty as some of the others.

Q: Well, you spoke of a lot of screening. I guess there was a lot of screening of him. But, a lot of Christians, of course, were killed by the Nazis. There were twelve million altogether, six million were Christians and other people. So, in order to sort of keep this thing so people can understand it in future generations, do you have any suggestions, perhaps, on how to do this?

A: You mean, on how to keep it before the people?

Q: Well, at least have it available for the younger generations.

A: I don’t know. I don’t know that I have any suggestions that would be worth anything. I hadn’t thought about that. I am pleased that there are organizations that are trying to keep it alive.

Q: Well, we certainly appreciate you giving us that help. Because, as a liberator and a Christian person that has seen this, that’s very, very…I mean, there are still people that claim that this hasn’t happened, but they are in a very small minority.

A: Everybody knows that is not true.

Q: I had an interesting experience three years ago. I went back to Germany, and of course, I can speak the language perfectly. I lived there until I was 16. I was born there. And, I found it very interesting to talk to the younger generation. And, they..at the time I was there and being able to read the newspaper and listen to the television news, they were very strong on talking about the Holocaust—in Germany—it took them a long time to do this, but they were all fully doing it now. And, I found that 30-year-old people—you know, you go out for dinner here and there, they can’t believe..they couldn’t believe that Hitler..that their grandparents would go along with this guy.

A: Right, right.

Q: They just couldn’t believe it themselves. You see. And, I really feel that there are many of them over there today—it’s a new generation.

A: Are there many Jews left in Germany now?

Q: Well, not very many. The Jews in Germany now are people who came from the concentration camps in Poland and moved to Germany. The German Jews were either killed or escaped earlier, and there is very, very little Jewish population left. But…

A: I haven’t done really very much reading, or any extensive reading of some of the books that have come on the question of concentration camps and that sort of thing. Survivors. We come across something all the time in the press—just like the Barbey trial, and this trial now—I have forgotten the name now. It starts with a “d.”

Q: Well, that’s Damyeck.

A: Damyeck.

Q: Well interestingly enough, you can probably appreciate it. I imagine when you experienced this, you didn’t talk about it the next day either. Although you wrote a very informative letter to your father.

A: Well, I talked about it, of course, within our officers in the Corps. That was it, and when I got back, of course, I had these pictures and had them made into slides, and I have shown that to my own family and to some friends and old Army pals that I come across, but not beyond that.

Q: What I was going to mention was that even my wife couldn’t, until a year ago, even discuss her experience, but now she is out of that, and of course she is speaking to the kids. But, I saw a video on Sunday of survivors in Tampa that they made up, and they told stories of what they went through. People are beginning to..some people..not all of them..some don’t want to talk about it..it’s too emotional..and too difficult. I find that in the interviews that we try to make with survivors, it’s a very touchy situation.

A: Right.

Q: But once some of them can begin to tell you..I couldn’t believe it myself, what I saw on that video, or the films. I mean, we, as a kid, I certainly experienced the persecution firsthand, being a Jew, but this kind of thing came later, and even I who certainly has lived through plenty of horror until I got out of there, but not of that degree. So. But I also appreciate to hear you say that you are glad that organizations that are doing this. I was just wondering what else can be done. I feel people, by and large, with everything on their minds now in the modern times with the political, economic—there are new problems now. People have constantly new problems. And sometimes they get a little bit weary of hearing…

A: I know a lot of people who think that’s all water over the dam now and have other things to think about – other problems.

Q: But as far as the human race is concerned, I am not so sure that there is something there that could..as you right said – circumstances can come up.

A: Well, I think that this Nazi thing and what they did, killing off people, Jews and people that they didn’t like, was probably the greatest blot on civilization in a thousand years.

Q: I agree with it. I was privy to – two or three years ago – New College down here has a speaker series. You are probably aware of it. They bring in world-caliber speakers, and Helmut Schmidt, the Chancellor of Germany, previously, who was a chancellor for a while you know. He was quite a brilliant fellow, an economist. And he spoke, and afterwards we had a little discussion and he said: “We will have to carry that Nazi burden until somebody worse comes on the horizon.” That’s one way of looking at it. I hope not, but I mean they are aware, and even so, I guess they have done well economically, and I have to give them some credit for that, although we helped them a lot.

A: Yes, we put Germany back on its feet, really.

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: And I hope that the high officials over there like Schmidt – that they don’t disown that past. Hope it never occurs again.

Q: Well as I mentioned to you, they were really very descriptive during the period we were there. In the first years they didn’t do much about it. Of course Adenauer came from the same town I was born in. He was the mayor of Cologne. And that’s where I was born. And he was a very fine man, and during the war he survived, which is quite a miracle too. Because he was on target right from the beginning.

A: Yes. That’s right.

Q: But somehow, they didn’t want to touch him probably. But they touched plenty of religious leaders in Germany.

A: Right. They couldn’t brook any opposition.

Q: Well is there anything else that you would like to [say]?

A: No, I don’t..can’t think of anything. I hope I have been able to give you some information of value.

Q: Well, I think you have—very much so. What I didn’t do is test the machine. I tested it before I came up, but I am sure it will work.

A: If it doesn’t work right, come back and we’ll do it again.

Q: If you..would you care to have that letter copied? Would you be…

A: No, I don’t think so right now.

Q: O.K. Well, it’s in here anyway. No, you go ahead. I’ll pack up. I’ll wait until you get through there.

This concludes the interview, which was made on November 10, 1987 with

Mr. Melwood Von Scoyoc at his home in Sarasota, Florida. Mr. Von Scoyoc

told me when I left his home. We interrupted the tape when his wife asked

him to check out what the electricians had done in the kitchen before they

were leaving. However, he emphasized the fact that his children and his

grandchildren are very familiar with the particular experience he described in the interview. The slides he showed me were too horrible to describe and have been seen in many places before this. But they are his private property and I am very grateful that he read his letter to his father into this tape and the interview. This concludes the interview. The interviewer was Harry Rosenberg.