United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with J. Milner Roberts
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with J. Milner Roberts, conducted by Barry Cohen on April 10, 1992 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

J. MILNER ROBERTS
April 10, 1992

Q: Would you state your name, please?

A: My name is Milner Roberts.

Q: Can we have a little background information from you, General Roberts?

A: Well, I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in September of 1918 and spent most of my early life there. I went to high school in a suburb of Pittsburgh, and from there I went to Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where I majored in metallurgy and had a minor in English and journalism, and also you might say a minor in military. And I was commissioned a second lieutenant infantry reserve in May of 1940, when war was already raging in Europe, and they weren't calling us up at that point. So I went into industry and worked in Detroit for a while for a machine tool manufacturer -- was assigned to the Chrysler tank arsenal where they were making the brand new medium tank, then called the General Grant. Our tools were being used to machine parts of it. On December 7th, 1941, I was minding my own business, driving down one of the major streets in Detroit listening to my car radio, and Pearl Harbor was announced. So I thought, well, Roberts, look around. You're not going to be around here very long, which turned out to be very accurate. That happened to be a Sunday. he next day I went back to the tank arsenal and there was an ordnance lieutenant colonel there in charge for the army. He knew I was a reserve officer and he said, "Roberts, why don't you go and put your uniform on? Come by, I'll put you to work," and I said, "Well, that's a nice idea, but I don't think the infantry would really like that and, furthermore, my father wouldn't like that either because he was a combat officer in World War I and he thinks that I ought to be a combat officer. So thanks very much." So sure enough, in about a week, they sent me preliminary orders and I reported at Fort Benning, Georgia where I went through a course to start with and then became an instructor in weapons. And from April, 1942 until June of 1943, I taught OSC, the general art of handling machine guns and related items. And by June of 1943 I was thinking, gee, I'm here on a training base and there's action elsewhere, and if I don't get out of here, the war might be over. So I put in for the airborne and next thing I knew I was a glider infantry company commander assigned to a newly organized airborne division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. So I went through all of the glider training for the next six months, and then the War Department, as it was called in those days, decided that they had made a mistake. They had too many glider elements and not enough parachute elements. So they said, we're going to break up this glider regiment and send you guys to Europe because they may need you over there. So in the end of March or early April, 1944, I found myself in Bristol, England, earmarked for the 101st Airborne Division. Well, actually, I didn't look forward to flying over the English Channel in a glider but, anyway, that was the assignment until about five days before the actual attack, which people had been talking about for literally years. When is the second front going to open? When are you going into Europe? I found myself assigned as a tactical aide to the commander of what turned out to be Omaha Beach, and this was a

General Leonard Gerow, commanding the Fifth Army Corps. So he said, "Roberts," he said, "Do you know how to read a map?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "You know how to read a photo map?" I said, "That in particular, because in the gliders, you didn't have any handy dandy maps with you. You had aerial photos -- about all you had." He said, "Okay. We'll give you the job." So I landed on D-Day with elements of the 16th Infantry in the First Division right in the middle of Omaha Beach. It was called the Easy Red section.

Q: A misnomer?

A: Well, in a way it was a misnomer from the point of being easy, but from the point of view of being red, it had something along that line. They divided the beachhead into different sections, Charlie, Dog, Easy, Fox, and George, and then each one of those with the red and white type, all for planning purposes. So without going into any great detail, I survived D-Day. Then for the rest of the campaign in Normandy, I would be sent out with elements of our combat forces every day and then report back to the general on what I had observed. And this was a period when we were stalemated for awhile in what was called the Hedgerow area of Normandy, but we finally made a breakout in July at and within a matter of about 10 days, we had swung around and headed east and actually bottled up almost the whole German seventh army in an area called Falaise. It was the so- called Falaise gap, and we effectively destroyed the German resistance in France because -- it wasn't true for the whole country, but it certainly was true for that section of France, west of the Seine River. And then we were given the opportunity to liberate Paris on the 25th of August, 1944, and that was a great occasion but we didn't stay long. They said, well, now, you guys go chasing Germans east of here. So within a matter of about three days, we got to Sedan, which had been featured in World War I, and then we really didn't have too much effective resistance in our area. We got to Bastogne, which is a pleasant little town, and we got there and we were stopped at what the Germans call the Siegfried Line, which is a line of fortifications somewhat parallel to the French Maginot Line but somewhat removed from it. The principle reason we were stopped was because we were running out of our fuel and food. Our supply line went all the way back to the beaches and it became difficult to really move forward and have supplies catch up. Furthermore, there was a fair amount of opposition further south. After General Patton's Third Army got to Metz, it was stalemated for a relatively short time. And then there were some problems in the Vosges Mountains further south. The northern advance had been faster than the southern advance. And then I was relieved from my assignment as an aide because General Gerow had been head of the War Plans Division at the time of Pearl Harbor, and the first Pearl Harbor Inquiry in the Congress was made in that fall. So they call him back to Washington, and he said, "Roberts, what do you want to do?" I said, "Well, sir, what I really want to do is to match my old man's accomplishment, who got to be a major in World War I. So I would like to get promoted." He said, "Okay. I'll put you in a staff section where you can have the opportunity to get promoted. So at that point, he put me in what was called G-5, Military Government Civil Affairs Operation of the Corps, and I continued in that until the end the of the war when I was reassigned to the G-2 section, which is intelligence. So we got involved with the Battle of the Bulge, very heavily involved on the northern shoulder, and we were confronted with the 12th S.S. Panzer division, sometimes

called Hitler Jugend. We had already been in touch with a couple of other S.S. Panzer divisions, the 1st Panzer division of Adolph Hitler and the 2nd Das Reich and we were accustomed to these guys. We also had been up against some of their elite units -- 3rd Parachute Division and other kinds of divisions -- but the northern shoulder held pretty well.[1] And by February, we were straightening out the line and ready to move to the Rhine. We got to the Rhine in early March of 1945, particularly to a place called Remagen where the Germans tried to blow up the railroad bridge but failed. They seriously weakened it, but not enough to prevent a number of our people from crossing over and getting a beachhead on the other side of the Rhine, which was significant. The 69th Division is the one that actually crossed that bridge. We then put pontoon bridges across the Rhine at Neuwied, which was quite a job. The Rhine is a very fast-moving stream, four or five miles an hour, which, if you try to put pontoons across it, it takes a little doing. We had two of them across there, one east bound, one west bound. It was at Neuwied that we first ran across some very unhappy people. These were not political refugees. They were prisoners of war who had been poorly treated. They were all emaciated, not in very good shape, but at least they were alive and we -- that was a portrait, a kind of a little future look at what we might find later. So we then circled around and completed the southern pincer of the Ruhr envelopment. The Ruhr area -- heavily industrial, Krupp works, this kind of thing. And we closed the gap and captured tens of thousands of prisoners, and it was obvious that the end was coming along pretty soon. So after that we headed east again and against limited opposition. I can recall going through Kassel, a pretty good size town. The main street was probably four miles long, and in that entire four miles, I didn't find one building that was still intact. There were a lot of buildings with the walls up but the roofs burned off. It had been pretty heavily damaged. But on the outskirts of Kassel, we found an airplane production plant that was still going strong until we got there. So the Germans still had considerable capability even though they had been very heavily bombed. But just about the time we left Kassel, we found a very hideous sight, and that was an insane asylum called Hadamar. Hadamar had been an ordinary institution for the mentally infirm probably back to maybe 1900, but after Hitler came to power in 1933 and began his pogrom against the Jews, he also found it convenient to try to get rid of a lot of non-Jews who were political opponents. So sometime in the late '30s, they passed a law which said that if you were found to be insane, you would be assigned to an insane asylum where you would be eliminated; because the theory was that the insane people might procreate and their progeny then would injure the purity of the Nordic race. I think that was the theory. You know, it's almost laughable, this kind of thing. Anyway, when we got to Hadamar, we found just mounds of clothing, men and women's clothing, and at that point, no bodies. They had already disposed of them. But we found something else, the S.S. Totenkopf elements of the S.S. divisions. Well, actually, it was a separate organization for prison guards -- had taken skulls and with a band saw, had cut them around about this area, and then there was a little depression in the resulting top of the skull. And they had used these to have toasts to the greater glorification of the Reich, I suppose. Well, that's pretty hard to believe, that kind of a thing, but there it was.

[1] The aforementioned divisions comprised units of the German Sixth SS Panzer Army under the command of SS Colonel Josef Dietrich.

Q: Did you inspect the buildings there?

A: I did not, no. Some of our other people did but I didn't have really enough time to do that. But I did see the skulls, which made a great impression on everybody. We began to grasp then the awful dimensions of what evidently had been going on.

Q: Did you inspect the grounds at all? Do you know whether there were any gas chambers or any other facilities?

A: Oh, yeah. There were gas chambers because that's how they dispose of these people, but not on the scale of an Auschwitz or a Buchenwald or any of these other places. This was a somewhat limited operation but, nevertheless, just as deadly.

Q: Do you know how they disposed of the bodies?

A: I think they buried them in mass graves. They certainly didn't bury them individually. And I don't think that -- I don't know what the final report was. I didn't see it, but that's our impression. They certainly didn't have individual burials. I think they just buried them in a mass grave, other than the ones they burned up. Anyway, we further -- went further east, and it was just at that time that Franklin Roosevelt died. I was in a jeep listening to the armed forces network when they announced that Roosevelt died, which really was a profound shock to everybody. I think it was the 13th of April, either the 12th or the 13th, and we were dismayed at the fact that he was the leader who had decided that he was going to carry out the four freedoms and we were in the process of doing part of that, and he was gone. And we had little knowledge of Harry Truman so -- but we couldn't afford to think about it too much. We had other things to do. So we proceeded over towards Göttingen, a famous university town going back hundreds of years, and it was a pleasure to note that Göttingen wasn't damaged much. By the time you go through a lot of the village towns that have been terribly shot up, it gets depressing. That town was not badly shot up except for the Bahnhof, the railroad station, which is always a point of attack. And it was there that I was assigned to take the surrender of a German general who had passed the word that he would like to surrender. It turned out that he had been injured on the eastern front and been sent back to his home for recuperation. And now with his hometown completely in the possession of the Americans, he felt he better opt to surrender rather than being forced to. So I and my jeep driver went up to his house. My jeep driver, by the way, was a young Jewish boy named Harry Adler. I'll have more on him later. So I went up to the door, and the general in full regalia -- he was a General Korps Infantrie, which is the same as a three star general. He'd been a German corps commander. He came out in his full regalia with his hat on and the uniform. He saluted. I saluted him back. He then ceremoniously presented me with his Luger, which I said, "Fine, good. Get out and get in the jeep." And then he said, "I can get in the back." I said, "No, I don't think so. I think you ought to ride in the front. I'll be in the back." For all I know, he might have had another Luger. So then he said, "Well, now, I have to see your general." All this was in German and Harry Adler was translating. So I said,

"Well, we'll see." So I took him to a P.W. cage as it was called, just an enclosure for prisoners, and I turned the general over to those people and that's the last I saw of him; except later on I heard he was highly incensed because they wouldn't permit him to talk to our general. He was briefed by probably some captain -- or debriefed. He didn't know much. He'd been out of action for two or three months. But my jeep driver, Harry Adler. Harry was born of a Jewish family in Germany, I suppose about 1925, something like that. So as a youth in the mid-'30s, his father thought, I don't like the way things are going here. So I think it was about 1938, the family got out of Germany and went into France. And so young Adler was sent to school in France, what turned out to be Vichy France, and then he, of course, then learned to speak French. But about the time of the Vichy surrender to the Nazis, the father said,"This isn't very good either. Let's see if we can get to America." And so they got through into Spain or Portugal, I've forgotten which. Anyway, they finally got to New York about 1940. So the young Adler was then sent to American high school, by that time he'd had a little Lyceum in France. So by 1942 or '43 when he went in the army, he was trilingual, German, French, and English, and he was exactly what I needed, because I had a lot of high school French but I had no German. It wasn't popular in those days, post World War I, to teach German because of the World War I situation. So as Adler and I were traveling around together, he was very much aware of what had been going on and he was very happy to be involved in taking a German general prisoner. But not long after that, in fact, on the 19th and 20th of April, we captured Leipzig, which was a major city, and then we began to find some really grisly things. About that same time the unit to our right or south of us had overrun Buchenwald. I was not involved in the direct liberation or -- you couldn't call it liberation, I guess. You can call it the capture of Buchenwald. But I did go down there because of my military assignment, and there they had a lot of bodies not burned yet, and they were stacked up.

Q: How soon after its liberation, for lack of a better word?

A: Maybe two or three days. I wasn't there at the beginning.

Q: How long did you stay there?

A: Oh, it was just to visit, to see what was going on.

Q: What did you see?

A: Well, I saw a lot of bodies and I wasn't sure what they were going to do with them. I don't think they were going to continue burning them because at that point they might have been able to identify some of them, but I have no exact knowledge of what they did. I do have more knowledge of another one a little later. So we're talking about Leipzig.

Q: Could you go back to Buchenwald and just describe what you did see when you arrived there?

A: Well, we went through the usual surroundings of heavily wired and floodlighted guard stations and this kind of thing and a lot of the barracks, and then the crematorium which we had pictures of. I don't have pictures of that, but in my history we do. And it was obvious that they had burned thousands of bodies there. How many thousands, we never knew. And they still had some left to burn when we got there. But there were also some still -- some people still survived.

Q: Did you see the survivors?

A: I saw a couple of them who were very emaciated and almost living skeletons, basically. It wasn't pleasant to look at them. Now what we did, of course, the American army would immediately give them medical treatment and suitable clothing and, obviously, food and shelter. What happened to them later, I don't know.

Q: Do you know the numbers in terms of survivors, how many survived?

A: I don't know how many survived Buchenwald.

Q: How many did you see?

A: Oh, I only saw maybe 15 or 20. There were maybe -- have been more but not many.

Q: Where were they physically located?

A: They were -- apparently had been put in one barracks which, for some special reason, I don't know, but they were probably people who they wanted to use for some particular purpose.

Q: Did you go into the barracks?

A: No.

Q: Inspect any of them?

A: No, I did not.

Q: Did you know of any other buildings?

A: There was a headquarters -- it looked like a headquarters building, but I didn't go in there either. Actually it was out of my territory. In the army you're supposed to follow certain guidelines, and I went down there more or less just to see what was going on and with no responsibility for it. But to get back to the Leipzig area, shortly after we got there, we discovered what had been a camp for slave labor. And this was a little town, more or less an industrial suburb of Leipzig, northeast of the town and, like all of these places, it had been run by the deaths head units of the S.S. Totenkopf. They would march these prisoners out

during the day and use them in the factories and then take them back at night. I doubt -- I have no knowledge exactly, but I doubt if there were many Jews in this group, because I think most of the Jews by that time, by late -- 20, 21st of April, had already been disposed of; but there's really no way to tell because there was nobody alive when we got there. Anyway, they had moved out the bulk of those people and marched them further east away from us -- for what good that did -- because if they marched them very far, they were going into the Russians. But the ones remaining who were apparently not too able, physically ill or maybe disabled, they put in a wooden barracks, which apparently -- then they put some kerosene or some kind of flammable on the roof and started it on fire with thermite grenades. Then they had the S.S. guards standing around in case anybody got out, which some people did, and they shot them down with the Schmeisser machine pistols. But the building was completely destroyed. It was still smoldering when I got there and there was nothing but, for the most part, very badly burned-up bodies, various stages of burning. There were several corpses that were entwined in the concertina wire that they had gotten to the point where they were trying to break away and then burned up. And there were others who had gotten up without burning, and they were shot down in their prison clothing. We really -- I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I should have by that time, but it's still hard to believe that humanity will do something like this, particularly people who are disadvantaged. You put in and burn them alive. For what reason? It was obvious the war was virtually over. These people weren't going to do any damage to anybody. It has to take a very twisted mind to authorize and carry out something like this.

Q: How large of a barrack was it?

A: I would say they were about a hundred feet long and probably about 30 feet wide.

Q: Was it just one barrack?

A: No. There were others that were not touched, but they put them all in one barracks, the one that they burned up, but there were others that were still there with nobody in them.

Q: Do you have any idea how many bodies were burned?

A: We estimated at the time about 150, although I have a history book here of our operations which said 300, but I doubt that. I don't think there were that many. Now, at that time our units met the Russians at the Elbe River at Torgau, and therefore our eastward movement at that point was over. So we were in position for about five days. And what to do with this massacre? So we decided, well, what we're going to do for one thing is to go around in Leipzig and surrounding areas and if there's anybody who has any significant position left, admitted, we'll take him up there and run him through this place and let them see what happened, which we did, and some of the women fainted. They couldn't stand it, which I can understand, but they all said, "We had nothing to do with this." As we said, you couldn't find a Nazi in a carload. And then we said okay, the bodies have been decomposing, what was left of them, for about four or five days. We'll have them prepare them for burial. So we got some of the good Bürgers and said okay, we want these bodies prepared for burial and we're

going to bury them in the middle of one of your most revered historic areas, which was a monument in downtown Leipzig to a victory of the German forces during the Napoleonic wars. And there was a little ceremony and we had them actually dig the graves, individually, of course. And we said, well, maybe we made some kind of impression at least. That's what we were trying to do. But we were a military unit. We weren't actually supposed to be in that business, but we did what we could. Then we got orders to go south, directly south towards Nuremberg, and we put our headquarters at Grafenwöhr, which was a major German training base then and, in fact, was used by the American army all during the cold war later. We got to Nuremberg. It was very, very badly destroyed. The one thing that we found made a lasting impression on me. During the glory days of Hitler, he would have mass rallies in which they had tens of thousands of people and torches with flames coming up and red banners with a swastika on them. And he'd be up there like Fidel Castro, just giving forth his oratory, which he was master of, and everybody was shouting. When I saw the place, it was empty except we used it for a dump for GI salvage and some trucks sitting around with some boys, and I thought, well, it's a far cry from what Mr. Hitler was doing here. Then this was first couple of days of May of 1945 and we had become part of the Third Army, at that point General Patton's army, otherwise we had been in the First Army for the entire campaign. So the orders were move into Czechoslovakia. And so beginning on the fourth -- third or fourth of May, we began crossing the line into Czechoslovakia and actually used for the first time the 16th Armored Division, which went in and occupied Plzen[2]. The Second Infantry Division was involved, the 97th infantry division was involved. And we found out when we got to Plzen that the people in Prague were screaming to have us come over there; but unfortunately, as history later showed, we were stopped 18 kilometers east of Plzen because of the deal that was worked out at Yalta to between Churchill and Stalin and Roosevelt -- and you may have seen the pictures of Roosevelt at that meeting. He was a very frail man, and it was literally about two months before his death and he may not have been thinking as clearly, but the agreement then was that Czechoslovakia would be part of -- under Russian control more or less. So when we got into Plzen, we sent a task force over. The Russians weren't even to Prague by that time and I got there into Prague a little later. And the Czechs were just as enthusiastic about seeing us as the French had been when we got to Paris. But then another unfortunate thing came up. We had been in the place for maybe two hours. We had a French liaison officer with us and he had been looking around the countryside. And we had bypassed, as we were moving so fast, a place called Flossenbürg where there was another Buchenwald on a small scale. And he came in to us and said, "Mon dieu! Mon dieu! They are burning the bodies. They are burning the bodies." Okay. What bodies? Where? Who? "Oh, down here, so come along." So some of us went down there and, sure enough, these German workers with piles of bodies still there were pushing them in and burning them up. Well, there was absolutely no way we could identify any of these. They were beginning to be in an advanced state of decomposition, so we said, well, it's not appropriate to burn. On the other hand, we just can't let them sit there so, actually, they were bulldozed in a mass grave.

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[2] **Also:** Pilsen (German).

Q: How many bodies were there?

A: Oh, there must have been a couple hundred and nobody had interfered with them. The people from the 2nd Division to our north had bypassed us and the 16th Armored had bypassed us and they were in kind of an off area so -- the guards had gone. I mean there wasn't any -- no guards around the place. They knew what was going on, but these workers were still dutifully carrying out their job. And so this one was one that we actually saw in operation.

Q: Were there any survivors?

A: No. We didn't see any survivors. Now there may have been survivors who -- when the guards took off, also took off because it's quite understandable. I mean, if you got a chance to get out of there, you got out.

Q: Can you describe the physical characteristics?

A: It was a similar place to Buchenwald but a much smaller scale. There was not as many buildings, the crematoria that existed there were not as large a scale, and it seemed to us as though this were kind of a last kind of addition to this whole series of Auschwitz and all the rest of them. And so in any case, like this, including the one near Leipzig.

Q: Can we just go back Flossenbürg? Can you tell us when that was?

A: It would have been on the -- either the third or fourth of May, 1945[3], and unfortunately it does not mention it in this book because the -- this book that I'm going to read something from was published very shortly after V-Day in Europe. It says on the cover from '42 to the 9th of May of '45, and I think some of the details of that kind of thing were just not put in here but -- oh, I was going to tell you that once we discovered something like this, the elements of the military police get involved. The Judge Advocate General people get involved and they then began to do an official history of what was found, when, where, and all the details. And I am sure that in the archives of the American Army, there is a complete description of what they found at Flossenbürg.

Q: Were there any prior briefings as to what to expect?

A: No. I think the reason for that was that they didn't fully grasp what the potential was. They might have decided to do something like that, certainly after they came across Buchenwald, which was about the same time they discovered others further south, but we had no actual

[3] According to the International Refugee Organization, Flossenbürg was liberated on 23 April 1945 following a mass evacuation of most of the prisoners to Dachau three days earlier.

formal instructions. What we did know was, number one, take care of any survivors medically and also see to their welfare; that is, proper food and a place to stay, clothing, and then have them interrogated by the representatives of the Criminal Investigation Division of our military police detachments -- CID it was called -- and then also have some JAG people there to see from that point of view what was going on. But this was kind of a do as you find it. I don't recall any at that point -- I'm still talking about the battle phase of this -- at that point any formal directives along this line. Now we had formal directives for the recovery of allied military personnel. In other words, this was what they called RAMP, acronym, recovery Allied military personnel. And those directives were pretty clearly in place, and I may be wrong, but I never saw any specific directives for this type of thing. I think they just didn't anticipate it.

Q: Any policy for what to do with the bodies?

A: We had no directives. All we had was what you might call common sense. We felt that if we could identify any of them, that's one thing, but no dog tags on them. I mean there simply was no way to identify them and you couldn't let them rot.

Q: How did this affect you personally?

A: Oh, it was very bad. Let me give you an example of that. After V-E Day we were headquartered in Plzen and we had a major problem with displaced persons, mostly eastern European, but a few from the west, who obviously wanted to go home. But things were in such turmoil that we just couldn't send them home. We had to do something with them. So we put them mainly in the Kaserns, previous German military installations[4], where at night they would have a place to stay and a place where we could feed them and take care of them. But there we had to maintain some kind of discipline. You just can't allow people in a very distraught frame of mind to be on their own. And we weren't putting in any harsh discipline -- that I'll mention in a minute -- but we had to see if they had certain standards. And I was visiting one of these places one day, probably about the middle of May 1945.

Q: And where was this located?

A: This was located outside Plzen, Czechoslovakia and I was going around inspecting. By this time I was a major on the general staff. And I discovered in one the body of an infant who had just died, apparently, and a rather distraught young mother. And I was so kind of hardened to this kind of thing, I really forgot my humanity. "You can't have something like this around here. Get that body out of here." I mean there wasn't any kind of spontaneous, "Oh, my goodness, this is such a tragedy and this is such a terrible thing. We want for you to have a proper funeral." At that point I had become, let's say, just kind of a hardened or embittered whatever to this kind of thing, and I thought to myself, well, boy, that -- that

[4] **German:** barracks.

wasn't the way to behave. But when you ask if it had an effect, I think that probably was the result of seeing these unbelievable massacres and deliberate execution of totally innocent people. It certainly affects you.

Q: Were most of these D.P.s Jews?

A: No, no. Most of them were Hungarians, some Poles, some people probably from Romania, from other parts of Czechoslovakia. They were mostly Slovak people who were impressed into serving the Reich. Another thing that happened in our area at that point was the discovery of about 35 young women who were all that was left of -- I think they said something like 1500 women who had been marched by the Germans away from the advancing Russians for maybe six weeks. And they had marched them in columns and fed them practically nothing, and when they would keel over, they would just shoot them. And we didn't discover this for several days after V-E Day. But we did find this small group of survivors, none of whom were more than 25, but they all looked like about 85, and they were emaciated, they were in terrible shape. And they told us a story and that led to a full-blown investigation.

Q: Do you remember where they came from originally?

A: They came, apparently, from Poland originally and they may have been Jewish. I really don't know. I kind of doubt it because why would they march them that-- they'd probably just send them to Auschwitz-- but at least they were about as badly treated as you can get. So another example of man's inhumanity.

Q: And they were discovered where?

A: In the vicinity of Plzen, not far from where we were. They were out in the woods somewhere, hiding.

Q: So at that point, there were no longer guards?

A: No, no. The word got around pretty fast that showing up in a German uniform wasn't a good idea unless you were getting away from the Russians. That's another story. About, oh, the day after V-E Day, my driver Adler and I were sent on a mission beyond our demarcation line. I don't remember why, but we were by ourselves in a jeep on a rural road. We were on a bend in the road and we discovered a whole German battalion, which kind of surprised us. They had stacked arms, which I was pleased to see, and they came rushing out and said, "Kamerad, Kamerad!" So we stopped. And I didn't understand what the guy was saying, but the German officer was telling us they wanted to surrender, surrender the sooner the better. So Adler was getting a huge charge out of this. Here was this little Jewish boy taking a part in a surrender of a whole German battalion. So I said, "All right. We'll be back." So we drove on down and accomplished our mission, whatever it was, I've forgotten. I think it was a railway car we had discovered they thought had certain documents in it. Anyway, on the way

back the officer said, "So what are you going to do?" I said, "Just take it easy. We will send people back here." So we got back to the lines. We said, "Hey, send a detail out there and march those guys in." But, boy, they didn't want to surrender to the Russians. No way. They wanted to get back to American lines. And that happened in many places. This was just one example. Having battled the Germans from Normandy to Czechoslovakia, when I went around that corner and saw a whole battalion, it shook me up a little bit, momentarily.

Q: Now you indicated that you wanted to read something from the Corps History. Would you want to show the book so we can see the cover?

A: Right. Now, this a printed description of the incident I've told you about near Leipzig (reads): "At the industrial town of Thekla northeast of Leipzig, our troops overran another political prison camp which still showed evidence of a horrible massacre on the previous day. With rescue by the Americans only a few hours away, inmates were herded into one long wooden barracks by their brutal S.S. guards. After locking the doors and covering the windows, the guards then threw incendiary grenades upon the roof. In a moment the whole structure was a roaring inferno filled with screaming human beings. A few broke out into the open, only to be met by a hail of rifle fire which cut them down, their clothing still burning. The smaller number that escaped had cleared their way through thick rolls of barbed wire, tearing their burning flesh in a miraculous dash to safety. The rest were shot down and their naked charred bodies were still there when our troops arrived. So here on the outskirts of one of Germany's greatest cities, world famous for its beautiful buildings, its culture, its monuments to great men," Leipzig, that is, "there stood a monument to a new type of German culture that the world should never forget."[5] And this was written in June of 1945. And so this tells you how we felt about this kind of thing that we had uncovered. I think it's significant that it's in that book. Primarily that book is telling about the military operations. Of course, we didn't run across too much of this, but it was incidental to the principle purpose, which is to record how this -- how the whole battle went, who was involved, where, when, and where.

Q: I heard you have two artifacts. Would you like to explain to us what they are and how you came about them?

A: Well, this one is a ceremonial dagger. There were a number of different Nazi organizations, some military, some paramilitary, and they all had their own --

Q: Excuse me. Could you jut turn it a little bit, face up?

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[5] United States War Crimes Investigating Team 6822 reported that Barrack No. 5 of the Thekla labor camp, a subcommando of Buchenwald, was set afire on 18 April 1945 by guards and that 90 prisoners died either in the fire or were shot in the attempt of escape.
(Source: International Tracing Service of the International Refugee Organization.)

A: They all had their own -- their own handy dandy daggers which could, of course, be used effectively. This shows you what it would be like to be stuck with one of these and, of course, that's a swastika here, and also up here, as a matter of fact, the name of the person who owned it on the back and his town. This was Neuwied where I got this, just on the Rhine River, on the east bank of the Rhine River. So you could use something like this to obviously kill somebody. Then after the person was dead, there's another type of ceremonial weapon -- you could hardly call this a dagger -- with which you could chop up the bodies. This is basically a saw for cutting through bone. So you take your bayonet type and slice up the flesh after killing the person, and then you come along if you want to, let's say, cut off the head with the bone structure of the neck. You've got the serrated portions here to act like a saw, and the German insignia up on top. I got several other of this type of thing which I still have, but I brought two of them along today just to give you an idea of the kind of thing we discovered.

Q: Were these carried by officers?

A: No, not necessarily. This could have been carried by NCOs as well as officers and I'm not certain if this one was actually an S.S. type. It looks like it but I'm not a hundred percent sure. I know there are now books where you can find -- which you can totally identify these things. I have another one which is silver with a pearl handle.

Q: Let's take a break.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: General, if you could explain the picture that we have?

A: Yes. That picture shows what is left and what we found of the remains of the people in that barracks that I talked about being deliberately burned. These remains, the corpses, you can see were huddled together, and died together and there's nothing left of the buildings except the ashes of these burned up bodies. Now some of them --

Q: Can you again tell us the geographic location?

A: Yeah. This happened in a little industrial suburb of Leipzig called Thekla, which I would guess was probably 12 or 14 kilometers northeast of Leipzig. And these people who were largely eastern Europeans, had been treated as slave labor by the Nazis and were working in, for one thing, an aircraft parts factory, and there may have been a couple of other places they worked. They would take them out during the day and bring them back to these barracks. As I said, when we approached, they marched out, some of them could still maneuver pretty well. The rest of them they loaded in this barracks and burned to death.

Q: Okay. Where these bodies are huddled, that's the center of what would have been the barracks?

A: Yes. It's approximately the center of what would have been the barracks. The outline of the barracks is still there, of course.

Q: And what is depicted in the background?

A: The background shows another barracks similar to the one that was burned up. They didn't choose to burn all the barracks. They just burned the one in which they had all these people en masse.

Q: And this is an original photograph?

A: These pictures were taken within 48 hours after the event, maybe less than that, and by a Signal Corps photographer. Contrary to army regulations, he gave me a copy of them which I have kept every since because, as I mentioned earlier, I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I thought, well, here it is.

Q: Is there anything else you want to tell us about that particular photograph?

A: Not especially. It just shows that when people are in a desperate situation, they'll either fight or flee, and some of them were deciding to try to do something. They got together and they were just burned up en masse. Others decided to flee and were able to get out of the building, a few without being burned, who were then machine gunned down, and others who were

obviously on fire when they got out of the building. And we'll see in just a moment, if you'll take a look at the next picture.

Q: Okay. Would you describe the next picture for us?

A: Yes. This shows about four, five, or six badly burned corpses which were outside the perimeter of the building and who -- obviously their clothing was on fire and they were burned to death outside the building trying to get out, and desperate to get to the fence and trying to get out.

Q: Do you have any recollection of how far the bodies were from the actual building?

A: Well, those bodies would be perhaps 20 to 30 feet, not very far. If you're burning from head to foot, you're not going to move too far. It's a very grisly thing to look at and very, very hard to comprehend what people will do to other people.

Q: Did you determine whether these people had been shot, in addition?

A: No, they had not been shot, no. They hadn't been shot. There wasn't any point in shooting them. I imagine that by the time they hit the ground, they were either dead or close to it.

Q: This also was taken by the same photographer?

A: Oh, yeah. All these pictures were taken by the same photographer at the same time. I might have mentioned the nonfraternization policy that the Army had, with good reason it turned out. We were not supposed to have any relations with German civilians except very perfunctory ones, such as where is the town hall and where is the railway station and that kind of thing but since -- at the time this policy was prepared, they weren't aware of how bad the situation was, but they didn't want the GIs cozying up to the Germans at that point. And a number of our troops who were of German descent were pretty embarrassed about the whole deal. It didn't make them proud to have been of German descent. And then you think about the -- as this book says, the great accomplishments of the Germans in the arts and music and science and even theology, Martin Luther. And you come down to something like that and you wonder how it can happen.

Q: (Inaudible.)

A: Provisional. Yeah. By that time we had no further use for anti-aircraft battalions, so they set up a provisional organization called security guards, and the letters on the helmet indicate that. These were -- they had nearly enough military police or regular organization to go around to handle everything we had run across, so they conferred these A.A. battalions primarily to security police and had their helmets painted accordingly.

Q: Would you describe this photograph here?

A: Yes. This shows more of the victims who, in their desperation to flee to safety, even though on fire, got as far as the concertina wire that is formed around the enclosure but then collapsed. You can see that their bodies continued to burn at that point. There were others who actually got into the wire and twisted up in the wire, and then were a few others who managed to get there without being on fire. We have a couple of pictures showing that there were some who got out with their clothes but they, again, were machine-gunned by the Totenkopf unit of the S.S.

Q: There's one more.

A: This picture shows the perimeter of the area and the type of wire enclosure they had and also the floodlights so that they could illuminate it by night, and what you see up in the distance is a guard station. And the area was divided into a couple sections and you can see that this was a path through two of the sections. The barracks aren't visible here because -- I think one of them is possibly visible on the right but that's off to one side. But it shows you the type of enclosure that they kept these people in, not nearly as elaborate as they would have around some of the bigger places like Dachau or Auschwitz or Buchenwald, but then on a smaller scale. And they weren't organized for the same purpose, but the results were the same.

Q: After leaving Flossenbürg, where did you go from there?

A: We went into Plzen and then I think I mentioned 18 kilometers east of Plzen, we were stopped and we were there until the 18th of June, 1945 when they pulled us out. They said you're the people with amphibious attack experience, so we're going to take you out here and send you back to the States. And after you have a month of R & R, so called, we will get you aboard a ship and send you to the Pacific, because we're going to be needing your assistance in the invasion of the main island of Japan, Honshu. And this was scheduled for October of 1945. Still you'll have enough time to see your friends when you get back to the States and then we'll ship you out to the west coast, and from there we will ship you to the Philippines. And from the Philippines then, you will be used probably in a secondary landing after the principle one. So we thought, well, we're not looking forward to assaulting Japan, but we are looking forward to getting back to the States. So we left LeHavre on the fifth of July, 1945 on board a very fast liner that had been the USS America. The army called it the West Point during World War II and crossed the ocean in about six days. We got back to Manhattan and we were among the early troops back so they had a big celebration for us. They had some vessels out in New York Harbor. They had fire boats shooting off the water, and they had people with jazz bands playing and whatever, whistles blowing. We thought that was nice, but it was even nicer to see the Statue of Liberty and be back home. And from there we were, as I say, given 30 days off. And at the end of the 30 days, the bomb went off in Japan and that precluded our use in the invasion of Japan, which suited us just fine, because if, in fact, Truman had not made that decision, it would have been anybody's guess, probably half a million casualties, both American and Japanese, and there had been enough death and dying already without that. So they let the genie out of the bottle as far as nuclear weapons are

concerned, but since they haven't been used since, it probably was a good idea in the first place. It saved a lot of lives at that time.

Q: How long did you remain in the service?

A: Well, in October of 1945 they said to me, "Now, Roberts, would you like to stay on active duty?" And I thought, well, the Army's going to be dullsville. Europe is flat on its back, so is Japan. America is preeminent total world power. Who's going to start a war? I don't want to do close-order drill. So thanks a lot, but I'll go back home. But I did say I would like to have a commission as a major in the reserve. So that was forthcoming. And I did go back home and I got into the advertising and public relations field. At the same time in the late 40s, they started to organize the reserve and I became increasingly active in that. And as a matter of fact, when Korea broke out, I was on active duty; but for reasons that the army later regretted, they didn't make use of organized reserve components very much then. They did to some extent, but if they had used more, it might have turned out a little differently. Anyway, for the next 20 years virtually I was increasingly active in the reserve. I went to the Army War College at Carlisle. I went to the Command General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, and by 1967 the Army then put me in charge of all the Army reserves in eastern Ohio, West Virgina, and western Pennsylvania. Then in 1970 they asked me to come back on full duty in the Pentagon, initially as a Deputy Chief of the Army Reserve on the army general staff, and then as Chief of the Army Reserve from 1971 to 1975. So I had an unusual career in that I had four years early on of full duty, and five years virtually of full duty at the end, and reserve duty in between with many periods of active service and schooling. I was promoted to major general as I assumed Chief of the Army Reserve at the beginning of May, rather, in May of 1971, and so I'm now a major general of the United States Army, retired. I'm wearing an insignia today of the Distinguished Service Medal, which we used to call the general's good conduct medal.

Q: Have you previously discussed your experiences in Europe and what you saw with other groups or people or with the service?

A: Not specifically in this type of area. I did do an audio oral history for the Army War College at Carlisle, which took me through, of course, my experiences in World War II and my early experience and subsequent, but there was no concentration on this type of atrocity thing, although it was mentioned but not as much as we have done today. There have been some references to that history. A chap published a book recently in which he attributed some of his comments to my oral history. So since I left the active army for nine years, I became executive director of the Reserve Officer's Association, which is a major military lobby on Capitol Hill. Since then, I have been working with General Daniel Graham and the Strategic Defense Initiative program, which seems to be going along in good shape now, despite many of our critics who wish we would go away, but we haven't.

Q: Are there any concluding remarks you wish to make?

A: Yeah. I think that it's fair to say that the American public represents a force for good in the world. We have plenty of blemishes in this country and things we have done that we shouldn't have done, maybe things that we could do but haven't done, but by and large, the United States stands as a good moral force for good in this world. We're always the first to send relief anywhere in the world, whether it's former foes or friends. The U.S. built up Europe after the war with the Marshall Plan. The U.S. handled the Japanese in a very positive way. And when things have gotten out of shape, why, dear old Uncle Sam was asked to come forth. And we've done that and I have been proud to be a part of that total operation.

Q: General Roberts, thank you very much for a very interesting interview.

A: Well, thank you for conducting it.

Conclusion of Interview