

Transcription of interview with M. O. Robinson, 537 Hickory Hill Drive, Stone Mountain, Georgia, August 31, 1978, 11:45-12:30 p.m., at Northlake Hilton Hotel conference room, by Kaethe Solomon.

KS: Mr. Robinson, I'd like to introduce you to the name of our project, which is "Witness to the Holocaust: An Oral History Project," and I have written a statement of the general purpose of the project to share with you. The purpose of our project is to talk with people such as yourself who were involved in the liberation of the concentration camps, and to hear from you your observations and the memories of your experiences. I understand that this can be difficult material to recall, but your personal point of view of your involvement in the liberation is important to record and should be part of recorded history, from which our children can study and, hopefully, learn. We have some questions for the record that we will have to answer first, and then we will kind of take a trip back in time together and reminisce a bit about some of the experiences you had. The questions for the record: Your full name, Mr. Robinson?

A. M. O. Robinson.

KS: And your address?

A: 537 Hickory Hills Drive, Stone Mountain, Georgia.

KS: Your date of birth?

A. July 11, 1923.

KS: And the place of birth?

A. Waynesboro, Pennsylvania.

KS: You're not a native Atlantan?

A. No.

KS: The name and location of the training camp you were at in the United States before you went overseas? Can you remember?

A. Camp Walters, Texas, Ft. Halliburton, Camp Davis, N.C., Camp Clayborn, La.

KS: You were at quite a few?

A. Yes.

KS: Your military unit was?

A. At the time? It was the 1477th Engineer Maintenance Company.

KS: At the time of the liberation?

A. Yes.

KS: Your age at the time of liberation?

A. Twenty-one.

KS: What was your prospective profession at the time, at the beginning of the war? What did you want to go into, or had you had any thoughts about what your job would be at the time you were taken into the Army?

A. Yes. I started out before the war; I had had one year of college; I was a chemist.

KS: And what is your present profession?

A: Chemist.

KS: So you really did carry out your ^{initial} desire to become a chemist.

A: Yes.

KS: What was your rank at the time of liberation?

A: I'm not quite sure; it was either PFC or a T5 (Special Corporal); I forget which; I really don't remember.

KS: All right. Which camp or camps did you liberate?

A: I believe it was Bergen-Belsen.

KS: Do you know the approximate location?

A: Yes; it would have to be in the British Zone, in the northern part of Germany; probably somewhat south of Hamburg---in that area.

KS: I see. And was your unit there along with the British units?

A: We were attached to the British 8th Army, I believe it was;

KS: we were Corps Troops---21st Corps or 23rd Corps or something like that. Somehow or other we were at that time attached to the British Army.

KS: I see. I'm going to go through some descriptive questions here that may help you to remember. How did you first hear about the camps, or Bergen-Belsen?

A: Oh, I think we heard rumors of them; but this particular day-- we never realized where we were going until we went up to the camp. It came right out of the blue, really. A couple of charts took us up there, and we had no idea where we were going til we got there.

KS: Did your superiors not have any idea?

A: I don't know if they did or not--maybe the captain did; I'm sure the rest didn't know.

KS: What did you expect to see there?

A. We didn't expect to see anything because we didn't know where we were going.

KS: And the mood of the unit, at the time you approached the camp, when you saw this camp?

A. Oh, we didn't know what it was, really. As we approached it, well, we thought it was some type of prison camp, but we didn't really know.

KS: You got closer to it---you were able to drive into the camp?

A. Oh, yes.

KS: What happened once you got inside the camp?

A. Well, we, uh...it was...it was not completely evacuated of people; there were a number of the...uh....emaciated-looking people in the area. Some of them laying, sitting on the ground, or sitting up against others; some were actually in the barracks laying in the bunks. I think as soon as we saw this we knew what we were into. We really did not know what we were into til we saw this.

KS: When did you arrive there?

A. Well, I don't remember exactly....

KS: The year?

A. Oh, the year; '45, of course. It would have been late April or early May, I don't remember when.

KS: It was in the Spring?

A. Oh, yes; sure.

KS: The camp as you remember it--can you give us a description?

A: The sights, the sounds, the smells?

A. Well, there were big double-barbed wire fences around there, I believe; a pretty big area--the open area was pretty big, and it had these big barracks, dirt floors in them; there must have been about 7, 8, 10 or 12 of them, I think. As I say, there were still some people in these things, with their prison...their striped...a lot of them had striped uniforms on.

KS: Were they pretty well emaciated?

A. Well, I think what...our understanding was that the people that were still there were probably too far gone to even.. even, uh...even, uh...try to, uh...save. And they had been left. We would give them cigarettes, and some of the people advised us not to even try to give them any...anything to eat or anything, because they just wouldn't be able to handle it.

KS: How did you feel when you saw these bodies?

A. Pretty upset...pretty bad, really. Pretty bitter.

KS: Angry?

A. Oh, yes!

KS: Angry at whom?

A. At the Germans, of course. Kind of unreal...you just didn't believe it, you know.

KS: It's difficult for you to believe what you were actually seeing?

A. Oh, yes.

KS: What did the prisoners do when they saw you?

A. Well, really, the ones that we saw didn't do much of anything... they were pretty far gone; they just smiled and tried to talk. I don't believe that there were any that could speak English, that I could remember.....uh, wasn't really....

KS: You had no specific orders concerning their treatment?

A. Oh, no. I don't know why we were there unless they just wanted somebody or the American troops to see the thing; or maybe they were expecting trouble.

KS: Did you remain there for any period of time?

A. Oh, I would say we were inside the gates maybe two or three hours. That's about all.

KS: And then you left?

A. Yes.

KS: To go where?

A. Back to our, uh, where we were stationed...where we were billeted. I believe the name of the town--I'm not sure where we were at the time--but we wound up in a little town called Haggenau, Germany, which was east of the *Elbe* River, which is now East German territory; it eventually became Russian..it was eventually turned over to the Russian Army.

KS: What happened when you returned to Haggenau, after having seen what you saw, did you share any of that?

A. Oh, yeah. Everybody talked about it...couldn't understand it, couldn't believe it, but we didn't get to the worst part,

though. We...I saw a lot more than just these...these people here. We..we actually saw the...uh...should I go into this?

KS: Please do, yes; please do.

A. We went through a couple of these barracks, as I said. I think that one, or the first couple were empty, and then we came into a couple of barracks where there were still some people living, but then we finally went into...uh, these were all men, by the way...we finally went in to a...

KS: The men whom you saw at the barracks?

A. This part of the barracks was the men's part. I understand that there was a women's prison adjacent to it. We went into this big building...I think it started dawning on us then that, uh...what we were going to see...we went in the entrance door. There was a little small room, maybe twice the size of this hotel room here, and it was just filled with clothing: shoes, pants, blouses, hats, just thrown in one huge pile. We went on past this into the next room and this was a big washroom...they had these big...like you'd see in a big factory...they had the circular wash area in the middle; they were either tile or cement, I forget which; but then, on beyond that, we went on around--I believe there must have been an angle or a door in there--but we went around the corner and here was a room which was just filled almost to the ceiling with bodies....all dead...naked, emaciated people...uh, half of them with their eyes open staring at you...uh...there must

have been 150 or 200 in that room, and obviously this was where they had been gassed.

KS: When was the last time you thought about what you saw there in that room?

A. Oh, you continue to think about it every now and then, particularly when anybody brings the subject up...it was really almost undescrivable.

KS: Did you ever have nightmares about it?

A. No, I never really had any nightmares about it; the peculiar part was how this...they could...it really wasn't that far from this little town in Germany...and how these people could not know what was going on is a little bit difficult to believe, really.

KS: Were there ovens?

A. We assumed there were; I didn't really see any. There must have been. If I remember correctly, this..the washroom with all the bodies was the last place we saw, and we didn't see the rest...any more...but there must have been.

KS: When you entered the camp at Bergen-Belsen, were there any SS troops?

A. Oh, no. No. There were no armed Germans around at all; they had some civilions not in the camp...on the outside. I think they were starting to put them to work to...as I understand they were going to make them dig some big pits and bury these people. We saw no....if we had seen any SS they probably

wouldn't have lasted very long, because I think they may have been...uh...

KS: They would have run, then, when you came, is that it? If there were any SS?

A. If they hadn't run, they'd have been sorry, I think. It was a pretty bitter feeling.

KS: The unit that you came in with, did they have a chaplain in it?

A. No this was just a single company attached to a corps and we weren't big enough for that type of thing. I'm sure there were chaplains available, but I don't recall. Some of the guys may have gone and talked to them; I don't know.

KS: The men that you came in with, or yourself, were any of them moved to prayer or any type of unusual reaction at the moment of seeing what they saw?

A. It may have been...I don't really know. I wasn't; you know, I'm not that type of an individual, but I'm sure there might have been some that would...I'm sure there must have been.

KS: I see. Your feelings toward the Germans after having seen what you saw, can you describe them to me?

A. I would say that for the next couple of weeks I was very bitter. We would have loved to get our hands on the people that were actually responsible for it. I think many of the guys kind of

felt that as far as the average German soldier was concerned, I don't think there was really that much animosity, but I think that most of the soldiers--most of the GIs-- felt that those guys were sick and tired of the war and probably had had nothing to do with it anyway; and really, I think that if there had been any SS or any of those types around, yes, they definitely would have probably been shot on the spot or something like that. But the average German, I mean, yeah, you... ..you couldn't believe...I think there probably was a problem of how it could happen without them knowing it. It's possible, although it's hard to believe that a lot of them didn't know. They may have known or heard rumors and didn't want to touch it, you know, like a lot of people say, "Well, let's not muddy the water, maybe it will go away"--this type of thing-- I would assume that's the way the average German reacted, but as far as animosity towards the average run-of-the-mill German, uh, probably not too great. But for the authorities, the people in it, yes, of course.

KS: Putting yourself in the position of a dictatorship, and having, perhaps, a neighbor rounded up and then, putting yourself in the position of a German citizen who, if they hid a political prisoner or a gypsy or a Jewish person who at the time was a victim, how do you feel you would have reacted?

A. Well, I'd hope I'd...I don't think that's quite a fair

question, because I don't think the Americans would have reacted quite the same as the average German. The average German, I think, was raised in a lot more authority and respect for authority, and was probably a lot more docile. I don't think the average American would quite put up with it, because I think the average American would tend to rebel a lot quicker than the average German would. That's strictly an assumption...I hope that I wouldn't (put up with it).

KS: You think that the psychology of the German people had a lot to do with it?

A. I think it must have...I think they must have been...they certainly were hoodwinked for many years.

KS: Brainwashed people?

A. Yes.

KS: The military: did they provide in some way for you to cope with the experience that you had gone through...were there any rap sessions of any sort to share?

A. No.

KS: There was no provision for that?

A. No.

KS: Did you have a family at the time?

A. No. Parents and sisters, but no.

KS: Did you share any of the information?

A. Yes, I did. I said that this bothered me; I did write... I wrote most of this down in the letters back to my family and they had retained these letters for a number of years and somewhere along the line they got lost. And I am very upset about that.

KS: Yes; they would have really been valuable for that information. Did you share this with them when you returned from abroad?

A. Yes.

KS: What was their reaction?

A. Well, again, I don't believe that they...you almost had to see it to understand it. Second and third hand is a little bit...not necessarily as impressive, obviously, but, uh, they were aghast and everything like this, but I don't think it was quite as impressive as...well, for instance, the recent film on the thing...

KS: The "Holocaust".

A. The film was in certain spots much more impressive. You really have to see these pictures to believe it, or be there to really believe it.

KS: In order to really believe what went on?

A. Yes.

KS: "The Holocaust" TV film---what did that do to you when you saw it?

A. Oh, I believe it was very believable, in most instances, with just a tiny bit of Hollywood in it, but it was probably very true to life; very real.

KS: Was that the first time in a long time that you had thought, or did it make you think of your own involvement in the very experience?

A. Well, it refreshed it--no doubt about that. No; it wasn't the first time...it keeps popping up every now and then; but it revived it very strongly.

KS: You say 'it keeps popping up'⁸-could you be a little more specific as to how...?

A. Oh, I don't know. You get to talking about the war, and the German people, and the various peoples, and the Jewish people and their problems, and it just comes back to you. Or, you read books like Leon Uris' Exodus, and this kind of thing where it was very vividly described again (which I thought was an excellent description of it). Everytime you run into something like this, of course, the thoughts come back.

KS: Your family, now? Are they familiar with "Holocaust" history?

A. They watched the film, yes.

KS: Outside of the film, have you been sharing things with them in terms of your own experience?

A. Probably not quite so much. It's something that you don't really...uh...like to talk about...it's pretty bad, really.. I mean how can you get any worse? It's pretty hard to conceive of anything being any more...

KS: It's a grim thing to share.

A. Oh, my God! Yes. Oh, yeah.

KS: The religious area of our questionnaire has some questions in it that I would like to share with you. Do you consider yourself a religious person at this time?

A. Not really, no.

KS: Did you consider yourself a religious person at that time?

A. No. Just an average Presbyterian, or probably below average. (laughter ^{his})

KS: It's a hard thing to judge; average or below average in anything, right? (laughter, both parties).

A. Right.

KS: Any conscience thought, well, I'm going to ask you this question anyway, as part of your last answer, any conscience thought about God or religion at the camps that you were aware of for yourself?

A. Not really. Only the thought probably enters your mind that if there really is a God, how can He let this happen? And I think that's probably it, as far deep into it as I got; I mean it just doesn't seem very possible. It's hard to believe.

KS: Your religious feelings, did that have anything to do with how you would even view the Germans as a people? Having seen what had happened?

A: I don't understand the question.

KS: Well, you say "if there is a God" and "it's difficult to believe in a God" as to....I think what I'm really trying to say is did these people have any religious feelings? Could they have had any religious feelings & have let something like this go on?

A. Oh, I think it's very easy for somebody to have very deep religious feelings and ignore something like this, because it's ..uh...they're not directly involved, and they just ignore it. People do this every day in other things, don't they? I mean, they're very devout on Sundays or Saturdays, but the rest of the week they are not so devout, so I think it is easily done...or it can be.

KS: Uh..yes.

A. People can justify or rationalize most anything if they really try hard enough.

KS: Yes; I think we're good at rationalizations aren't we, as people.

A. Does that answer the question?

KS: Yes, very well, as a matter of fact. The political aspect of it---did it change your political point of view on the Civil Rights movement or Cambodia or the mid-East problem? or any of the present situations--did your experience as a liberator....?

A. No, I don't see where it necessarily follows that it should, but it didn't. I think it points out that the...unbelievable dangers you can run into in dictatorships..this type of government--it seems like they can almost get away with anything, really.

KS: Do you have children, Mr. Robinson?

A. Yes; five.

KS: Five children. Their ages now?

A. O.K., the oldest boy is married--is 25, and the youngest girl is 11.

KS: So you have how many boys and how many girls?

A. Three girls, two boys.

KS: Are they...if one of your children should say, "I would like to follow the Nazi dictates?"

A. Well, there would be trouble there! Yes.

KS: What do you think you would say to them?

A. Well, obviously, I'd have to try to point out the...the fallacies in the...in the philosophy...in the Nazi philosophy; the pitfalls and where they are going to run into trouble and why it just doesn't make any sense.

KS: Would you share your experiences?

A. Oh, yes.

KS: You have shared your experiences with your children?

A. Oh, the boys, probably...more than the girls--they are kind of young.

KS: Did you see this as any specific type of persecution--the Holocaust? or was it just a general German methodology of trying to---

A. Well, I think, obviously the Jewish people were far and away the worst hit, but there were many Eastern Europeans also who were also victims. The thing that...kind of a correlary to this whole thing...it surprised me a little bit...we did run into another, other, smaller labor camps, I guess you'd call them, where people worked the fields and some of the small factories, and these people, once they were liberated, I was very surprised that they did not seem to be very antagonistic against the German population. I mean, many times we saw them mingling and getting along really well....I had thought they would turn and be very bitter and beat the Germans, but they didn't seem to be doing too much of this.

KS: Are you referring to the satellite camps, the smaller camps, factories, etc., that existed throughout to support the German economy?

A. Yes, the economy and the farming, I believe. That surprised me.

KS: The people who came out of there, and I assume these camps were liberated at a similar time or close to that time--

A. Yes.

KS: They had absolutely no feelings, you say, that you could judge..

A. I didn't say...yes, that's correct.

KS: These people were---who?

A. They were probably eastern Europeans, probably, Slavs, and all the occupied countries, I guess.

KS: And were they dressed?

A. A lot of them had their striped prison uniforms.

KS: Did they look fed, or..?

A. Yes, they looked much different. They looked like they were perfectly healthy, I suppose, in some of the small camps. Well, these were not extermination camps---these were work camps.

KS: Slave labor.

A. You keep them healthy, you get more work...I imagine that's the philosophy they were run on. Most of them looked pretty good.

KS: And they mingled freely, from what you saw.

A. From what I saw, they mingled very freely; in fact, uh, in one wine cellar they mingled very freely. (laughter)

KS: In one wine cellar? Is that right? They made their way toward the wine cellar when the camp was liberated?

A. Everybody did. Including the GIs. A big mixture of GIs and liberated prisoners and German civilians.

KS: What happened to these prisoners from the labor camps? What did the GIs do for these prisoners, as opposed to the inmates of the extermination camps?

A: Oh, I don't know. You mean our own unit? Nothing, really much; I mean, we'd probably give them...uh...goodies to eat and cigarettes and this type of thing, but what else could you do, really? I think we'd probably send them on to camps where they were supposed to report in for return to their native countries

I guess.

KS: And you had no, as you told me before, specific directions as to where to send these people?

A. No; no...we weren't...

KS: I see.

KS: You said that you saw this as somewhat of a Jewish persecution.

A. Well, I'm not sure that all the people we saw in this camp were Jewish, I mean, in hindsight...in reading...I assume that many of them were, but a lot of these people in this camp that we saw were probably not...they may or may not have been Jewish, I don't know.

KS: Did it change your attitude toward Jews at all?

A. I never had any real attitude towards Jews.

KS: One way or the other?

A. No, really.

KS: I see. Do you feel a need to do something today to make sure that this doesn't happen again? Politics, education, or religion or any one of those?

A. Well, yes. But the Germans were a well-educated people when it happened. I am afraid that it is happening right now, probably in other areas of the world; I'm certain it is happening in some African countries and in southeast Asia; it's certainly, I'm sure it's happening behind the Iron Curtain, and some of these people are extremely well-educated, so I don't know what the answer is, really.

KS: Do you feel that sharing your own experiences, having seen what has happened, would be helpful in educating on a personal contact basis to avoid such a thing?

A. Oh, I would hope it would help; I don't have any idea if it would or not. I mean, this is the 20th century and yet it happened....it's, again, unreal. And it's still happening and we're almost into the 21st century...on a much smaller scale, of course, but it's still happening.

KS: This is one of the reasons why we are doing this project.

A. Well, I hope, certainly, that something comes out of this.

KS: I think right now that you have done something...by sharing this information with us that will be part of recorded history, to be studied and, hopefully, to be avoided in the future. We really appreciate your contribution to this. Thank you very much.

A. You're quite welcome, I'm sure.

KS: Anything else that you can think of that we didn't cover, that your own personal feelings or reactions...something that even this interview would leave you with wanting to share with other people?

A. Well, I think certainly that it should be...the younger generation should be made aware of this...that it happened, that it was real, and...

KS: How would you share this with your grandchild?

A. I believe I would...once they get old enough to...that they

won't get nightmares on account of it, I will tell them about it, but I think if you tell little tiny, very small children, it may do more harm than good; it's like the old boogymen, or something like that. I think that once a kid gets to where he or she starts to be able to reason with, that is a good time to tell them.

KS: In a social situation, if you were going out to be with a family or going out for an evening, would you share this type of information, if history came up and politics came up?

A. Probably, probably.

KS: And do you see this as a viable way of perpetuating the horror that existed at the time in order to avoid its reoccurring again? Would that be one of the ways...person to person contact?

A. Oh, I'm sure.

KS: O. K. Once again, we thank you for your candor. We'd like to leave with you this material, a brochure of our project, and if you know of any other liberators, Mr. Robinson, that we may contact who would like to be part of this project, and who have certainly, I'm sure, if they are liberators of a camp, would have information and feelings and experiences that they would like to share with us, we would very much appreciate hearing from you.

A. O.K.

(end of tape)

D.A.