TRANSCRIPTION OF: AARON COHN
INTERVIEWER: ELIZABETH JACOBS
DATE: 1/18/80
CAMP: EBENSEE
TRANSCRIBED BY: RUTH SCHEINBERG
RETYPED BY: TERRY ANDERSON 6/27/80

Q: (Elizabeth Jacobs) Your full name?

A: (Aaron Cohn) My name is A-A-R-O-N C-O-H-N.

Q: And address?

A: 1916 Preston Drive, Columbus, Georgia.

Q: Date of birth?

A: March 3, 1916

Q: Age at the time you liberated the camp?

A: It was probably the last week, the two weeks of April, 1945. I would say it was roughly about....I think the war ended somewhere in May, the 9th as I recall, and I think it was roughly between 2 to 3 weeks before the war was officially over.

Q: O.K. And your prospective profession at the beginning of the war?

A: At the beginning of the war, I was a lawyer. I was a graduate of the University of Georgia Law School and had practiced law two years prior to volunteering for the United States Army in the summer of 1940. I was already commissioned in 1937 at the University of Georgia as a 2nd Lieutenant, United States Cavalry, and I volunteered for duty

Q: O.K. Present occupation?

A: I am a Judge of the Juvenile Court in Columbus, Georgia and also practice law with my son, Leslie Cohn.

Q: And the military unit that you were with?

A: I was with the 3rd United States Cavalry; we were the corps Cavalry of General Patton's Third Army and 20th United States Corps commanded by General Walton Walker.

Q: And your rank at the time you liberated the camp?

A: I was a Major; I was the Regimental S-3.

Q: And the camps or camp that you liberated--their names?

A: We liberated the camp called Ebensee. Ebensee was located in the foothills of the Austrian Alps. I know we were going toward Italy; we had penetrated deep into Austria,

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A: ... it was just a little dot on themap, but we were the first troops at Ebensee and the first troops, I believe, in the compound, based on my observations.

Q: So, it was apparent that you were going through ...actually opening the gates?

A: If we weren 't the first ones to open the gates, I don't know who else it could have been, because I was the first American that most of these people, among the first Americans I would say, that these people had ever seen.

Q: Did you say that you knew there was a camp at Ebensee when you were going?

A: We did not know anything that there was a concentration camp up in Ebensee.

Q: Had you heard about the camps before? Did you expect to...?

A: I had already seen Ohrdruf..... I had visited .... [he spells it out.] OHRDRUP, which is one of the famous camps. I had already seen Ohrdruf, I had seen other concentration camps,but Ebensee was an unknown quantity. We had never heard of Ebensee.

Q: What was the mood of theunit as you approached? Do you remember, was it just another objective?

A: No, we were on reconnaissance ...the German resistance had been broken and we were ... had deeply penetrated ... the third Army had deeply penetrated into Austria and into the Austrian Alps, and some of the other sister units were into Czechoslovakia and we had heard that the Germans were going down. The Nazis were going down into the National Redoubt (?), and then we received orders to go from there into Italy, because we had heard that some of the partisans were going into Italy, and we were supposed to go down there and we finally went down there and met the British 8th Army coming up from Italy. But, we were on a Cavalry....a great Cavalry mission, which was to precede the advance of the main body and seize any bridges and sort of scout out and help clear the way with our armor for the other people coming in behind us.

Q: The fact that you had been to camps before... did that, did you know what to expect ...were you ...shocked?

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A: Oh yes, no, no , I was not shocked, I had already seen it in other camps.

Q: Can you give me a full description of the camp as you remember it - sight, sound, smells, number of people, where they are from, and anything that you can remember?

A: Yes, naturally this happened sometime ago, but it is very vivid in my mind, because it left a lasting impression with me. I recall very much the day that I walked in, because I walked into the compound that day and I think I was the first American that they had ever seen, because as I walked into the compound - as a tank officer - I had on the following equipment: I wore a combat jacket issue which zipped up in front and it was a combat jacket that all tankers wore in Armored forces. I wore tank boots and my breeches were in tank boots. I was 29 years of age at that time. It was 1945, 29 years old, very blond, freckled, and as I walked into the compound, there were roughly 2,000 - well, the courtyard, it was ... I had come in to... well, there was a courtyard, because you see there were barracks all around the courtyard. Well, in the courtyard were naked cadavers, dead Jews, these dead Jews were lying in middle of the courtyard and I estimate certainly a minimum of 400 to 500 , possibly 1,000 of the dead just lying there. They were in the form of skeletons, starved, emaciated, cadavers that were lying there... they were festered, there were flies all over them; it was an incredible sight. There were trucks of...around the area too, such as the one that I have here, which we took a picture of. Well, the bodies were stacked, I think, that possibly the guardsmen who kept the camp wanted to dispose of the bodies, dispose of these other bodies, but we ... the Americans moved so fast, we were Armored Cavalary, we moved so fast ...we were moving at that time - 60 to 75, 100 miles per day, and I think we were in that compound before they really knew what happened. The guards got out, but nevertheless they were not able to cover up the things that they had done. Now, as I came into the compound, I remember so vividly this...because as I said it has a lasting impression with me.... as I walked into the compound, someone in the crowd said - in German " Dass is a shutztalfermeir"... In German, that means, that is an SS Major. The SS troops were Heinrich Himmler's troops, who were charged with the genocide and the extermination of the Jews in Europe for the final solution. And, these people were crowded around the

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A: bodies and I would say - there were possibly 100 to 150 people there. Practically all of them had the little gray and white uniform that inmates of a concentration camp wore. And you could see the knees, most of them had no shoes, and the knees and those that were practically naked, the genital organs were swollen, because you could see they had been starved to death, or starved. What impressed me, particularly, was the knee joints... they were huge, because of the fact that these people had no food,etc As these people stood around withtheir gaunt faces in a state of starvation, one said, someone said..."Dass...is an shutztalfermeir." They saw me, and incidentally I had a gun, you see, I had a 45 automatic, and it was in a gun holster which went over my shoulder; it was outside; it was not on my hip, but on my - up against my left breast. It was the type of gunholster that the tankers wore, and when they saw me with the boots and with the gun ... and they had never seen an American before - and they said "Dass is an shutztalfermeir." They were sure I was still part of their captors and I was a Nazi Major, but an SS Major, because of the way....

Q: Not the Wehrmacht?

A: Not the Wehrmacht, because the uniform is a little different to them, and the gun was in a different place. And I said - "Nein .... Ich bin nisht a shutztalfermeir. Ich bin an Americana Major." And at that time, first when they thought I was a shutztalfermeir, they backed away from me, you know. The crowd sort of surged backwards, and then I said "Ich bin an Americana Major" and then when I said that, they said..."Oh an Americana Major" and then everybody said -"Americana, Americana" and they started surging a little closer, and then I said "Ich bin an Americana Yehuda. And when I told them I was an American Jew, they then - everybody crowded around me and they said - they kissed me and hugged me - do you know my Uncle Louie in St.Louis? Do you know my Aunt Sadie in Brooklyn? I have a cousin in San Francisco. You know in the United States, everybody is supposed to know everybody else. You must know my Uncle Louie in Brooklyn, and then they picked me up on their shoulders, like a winning football coach and they paraded around. They took me, I was a hero, you know, because I was their liberator. I won't say I was the individual liberator, but my unit liberated them. We were the first troops there, among the first troops,

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A: I cannot say if the Third Cavalry....but I feel sure it was my unit that found the camp, because we were ahead of the main body, and there was nobody ahead of the United States Cavalry; no one was ahead of the Cavalry because we were the first people out there. General Polk, who was Colonel Polk, my regimental camp....he immediately, knowing that I was Jewish, knowing of my interest in this type of thing.... I was his right hand man and said "Aaron, I want you to go over to the camp immediately." I went over to the camp immediately. The people picked me up on their shoulders; they paraded around. They just treated me like I was a conquering hero. I saw everything. As I recall, they too had their oevens; they had the places where they had shot them and burned them, and on railroad ties, the crematorium, and the place stunk to high heaven. It was truly a Holocaust. I didn't dream this; I saw this. When you smell it....and I spent roughly a week there, because the war was about over and we were in a stable position at that time to kind of sit for awhile. I would say I know I spent three or four days there. These are the people that I talked to. I met some fantastic Jews, one who I shall never forget who was a former lawyer. When I told him I used to be a lawyer....He was from Vienna and had been decorated by the Emperor Franz Joseph. He told me that his family had lived in Austria for 900 years, that he had been decorated in World War I by the Emperor Franz Joseph himself, that he had an illustrious legal career and he turned to me and said "And now look at me!" He said, "You must promise me that you will do everything you can when you go back to the United States to make sure that no one ever does this to you." I said I promise you that I will, because I am a very affirmative Jew and a very affirmative American. And so I met a girl who was a lovely girl who had been educated in England; she had gone to Oxford or one of the schools there, equivalent thereto. I don't know whether Oxford let girls in, but I think so--well poised, well educated, a lovely person, you could tell, of great gentility. And she told me about how the Germans came in, and she was trying on some shoes. And she had one shoe of one kind and one shoe of another....this sticks out in my memory. And when they came in what that "Arous"--in the snow--"Get out!," she said. Her father, they put him in one place; they put the mother in another place; they put her little brother in another place, and

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A: and her in another place, and she never saw them again. They all went their different ways. She told me the Germans put her in a brothel to service German officers and that's the way she survived, and then later on she ended up in a concentration camp. These were two of the people I remember very vividly; they all told me that they were all going to go to Israel, and that the bones of their ancestors were in Europe and they would never come back.

Q: Was there any...did something, in the tour of the camp, did anything specific - any specific buildings or anything you remember?

A: No, I took my own tour; there ware no tours; I took my own tour; I walked all around the camp; some of thepeople showed me around, of course. I became friendly with some of them, and they would say - "Major, let me show you this." "Major, let me show you that."

Q: What exactly didthey show you...?

A: As I recall, they showed me the crematorium, they showed me the barracks, they showed me railroad ties where they wereforced to lie down and be executed, and they piled them up on these railroad ties and burnt them; they showed me all of these places. They told me that Ebensee had about 12,000 inmates, that in this camp were Croats, Slovaks, Poles, all the various, Magyars from Hungary, Hungars, all the ethnic groups of all the countries in Central Europe. I do not think there were any French or Dutch, as I recall. Most of them were from Italy, because of the location--primarily however, from Austria. Of the Czechoslovakian groups, the Slovenes, the Croats, and the Poles, etc. They all told me that in this camp there was an intense nationalistic feeling. The Slovaks and the Croats had their own age-old hates that they had for the last 2,000 years; the Poles and the Magyars didn't get along. Nobody got along; everybody became affiliated with their own little nationalistic group, and as they said - and they all, even though they were in misery together, you would think they would have compassion for each other, but no. They all hated the Jews. And there were more Jews than anybody else, naturally. There were several thousand Jews; there were about 12,000 people in this camp, and it was considered a satellite camp that no one had ever heard of.

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Q: Did they separate the nationalities in different areas?

A: I think that they were, as I recall. I think that they were distinguished, and they were separated. There was an intense nationalistic feeling, but as I said, the Jews told me that all of them hated theJews. But, there was no compassion, and no commiserating for each other--Nothing of a feeling of brotherhood among people who were suppressed and persecuted, even though they had this common bondage, and that I remember very, very vividly, because it is so different, for instance, in the United States. I keep thinking back, how we have always tried to be a melting pot, how we have tried to take our cultures and merge them, and forget the nationalistic ethnic backgrounds, and that impressed me very much as a fairly good student of human nature. There was one thing I wanted to bring out....Oh, I saw them unloading - we brought in food and doctors. I was present when we had some flour that one of the people (they were unloading to bake bread for) and I ... there was a group of them standing by the vehicle when a flour sack burst open and half of it was spilled in the mud in the courtyard; I saw six men leap to the ground on their stomach and lick the flour from the black mud and from the water, which gives you an idea of how starved these people were. I also have a very vivid memory of a Austrian or Hungarian nobleman, of the nobility, who told my colonel, Col. Polk, of these poor people... we did not know this was happening. "Now that you Americans are here, what can we do for these unfortunate people?" And Jimmy Polk says: "Well, you can feed them, you can help them... you can help house them." And he looked at some of these people and said with disdain - "But they are Poles." And Col. Polk said, "Why you son of a bitch..!" You see, in Europe with the ethnic groups, in spite of the persecution of Hitler, in spite of the common bondage, the lesson that I learned over there was - they could not help each other, nor would they help each other. And the Jews were, of course, the most cursed of the lot, because that anti-semitism was so virulent, so virulent that they were the bottom of the heap; that's the way the German theory was anyway.

Q: Did the condition that they were in make you think of the not-less-than a person, but just - was it hard... to think of a human being in that state?

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A: Well you've got to remember, Elizabeth, I am Jewish, and I am an American, but when you are brought up with - brought up with a Jewish father and Jewish mother and a Jewish home, from the time you are a small child, you are inculcated with all the ideas .... I was in the Young Judaea Club and I was bar-mitzvahed, so I had the whole Jewish bit, and my folks were foreign-born and I am very familiar with pogroms, I heard this as a small child, I am very familiar with anti-semitism, and so naturally I was quite sensitive to their plight. And I had a great compassion, a great feeling for them. To most of the American troops, although they said - in my book - "how could any human being treat anybody else like that" and they were basically were compassionate; I don't think they had the feeling for them that I did, as one Jew to another.

Q: How did you rationalize whatthe Germans had done? Was it just because, like you said... you understood the politicial nature of it or....?

A: My rationalization was as far as the Germans ....was that all idealism had gone out the window, it was a bread and butter thing. As so many Germans that I saw after the War....they were, they hated Hitler, not because of what he did to the Jews, Germans that I knew who hated Hitler, not because of what he did to the Jews, but because they lost the War.... Most of the Germans that I knew.

Q; Were there any civilians around the camp, other than that nobleman that you mentioned?

A: There were some people in thevillage, of course that came by, etc, but it was always the same thing." We didn't know what that yellow smoke was, we had no idea this was going on, we are good Germans, we are good people, you know we are good Austrians, we could not do this." But, by the same token, I don't know what they could have done anyway. When they were civilians in the community, even though they had harbored anti-German feelings, the government was in complete control, everybody was in fear of their life, and of course, it is hard for me to say what could have been done or what could not have been done. All I know is they wanted to let us Americans know, they were afraid of what we were going to do to them, they were frightened of the Americans, because as far as they were concerned, here was a new enemy. But they just simply wanted to be known as still the good guys. We didn't know anything about

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A the "bad guys." It reminds me of that famous story about the guy who was playing the piano, you know, Harry Truman's favorite story: the guy who was playing the piano in the house of prostitution, and when they raided the place, the guy said: "All I did was play the piano downstairs, I never knew what was going on upstairs." But, of course, it is ridiculous, they knew what was going on.

Q: Did any of the civilians tour the camp or you know?

A: After the war .... we, as I recall, General Eisenhower came down to view this camp, I had a picture of General Eisenhower when he came down, no - not at this particular camp - that was a D P camp later on - but I think, as I recall - in the Third U S Army, General Patton and other people made the civilians go through the camp to see the atrocities that had been inflicted upon the Jews.

Q: They didn't make them help out as far as taking care....?

A: Elizabeth, I am not sure of that, I feel sure that there were work camps and work details and civilians that helped clean up the camp. I feel sure that this was done. Although I had no part of this part of it, because I was in a combat unit and I was not part of civil affairs, but I feel quite sure that they were made to come in and clean up the camp.

Q: At any time were you ordered to protect these civilians from inmates - from...?

A: Never, never. The inmates that I saw did not ravage, they were .... there was just a great feeling of liberation, that it was all over with, but a great resolve to someday to get out of there and go to Israel. To find a place to live.

A: I don't know if it is possible to put into words, but do you think you could at least attempt to describe what it felt to you to see (you had seen camps before and you know what it was like), but it must have been mixed emotions for you to be the first people there to set your European bretheren free. Did you have any particular thoughts on this?

A: Yes. I feel like it was all worth while, a lot of people, lots of my friends who were non-Jewish, they used to talk about when they were in Germany they would see the beautiful frauleins; they would co-habitate with the frauleins, and they were living with them. You know, it was a tough war, and they were young men, and they

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A: took up with the German girls, and the Germans are basically very attractive, physical people. They had modern bathrooms. They were very much like the United States in that respect, and so many of my non-Jewish friends would say later on when they became friendly with the Germans, "Well, maybe we fought the wrong people." And I said to them "Like hell we did; we fought the right people when you look at these atrocities." And I would tell them "Listen, lots of these people were not Jews. They were like you and your family." So I had the great personal satisfaction of feeling that having volunteered for the Army five years before, that General Eisenhower spoke of the great crusade....although this was a meaningless word to some people, it was not a meaningless word to me, because I felt like I was a part of history, a part of liberating my breathern. And I think all Jews have, if you are a good Jew....I think all Jews have a sympatico for each other regardless of what country we come from, because of our common cultural background.

Q: Did you, the fact that you were Jewish, prompt you to volunteer? At that time, did you know of Hitler's policies in the beginning?

A: Elizabeth, if I search my soul....I think even if I was not Jewish, I would have probably volunteered because I am, and was, a real patriotic American. I felt like Nazi Germany was an enemy of this country and that soon we were going to go to war, and I wanted to get in now. And I could not rest practicing law, knowing what was going on in the world. As a matter of fact, I remember when I told the Judge that I had to go, he could not understand why I felt I had to go. But the fact that I was Jewish and knowing of the anti-semitic policy of Nazi Germany and of what was going on in the world, even....I would say this strengthened my patriotic feeling to the extent that it was also a sort of personal war with me.

Q: Getting back to a little more specifics about the camo, you mentioned at the beginning that they though you were an SS. When you reached the camp, were there any German guards around, anybody of the camp personnel?

A: There were no German guards; they had all flown....

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Q: So there were no guards?

A: There were no guards; they got out of there. This happened in a lot of the other camps, you know, they got out. They got their vehicles and they left. We captured a number of German soldiers in that area, but the guards we did not catch.

Q: How did the people in your unit, especially the ones who had not seen anything like this before react?

A: I think that they, like most good Americans, when they saw this, that they finally came to the realization what beasts , what beasts these people were. What beasts that they were, what beasts could do this to people. And the feeling was, you know, "I don't see how any human being ..." Because you know, basically, the average American is a very decent guy; he pulls for the underdog; he can't kill in cold blood, basically. I haveknown soldiers that would personally, I think, could commit atrocities like anybody else could, because we human beings all - are different. But, basically, the average American soldier when he saw this, he was horrified and astounded and even I know American officers who were high up....could not comprehend that this could be fostered by a....where the government sponsored this sort of thing.

Q: Did anyone ask to be relieved from duty after seeing the camps? I mean did it shake up the unit pretty much?

A: No, it didn't shake up our unit at all. It was another episode in what our unit had gone through. It just made the people in our outfit.... In my unit, there were not people of ethnic background. We had lots of kids of the Polish ethnic background, the people in my unit, the enlisted men of the Third Cavalry came to us from upstate New York and Michigan where lots of youngsters of Italian, ethnic background and Polish ethnic background; they were fine soldiers and parents of lots of them were first generation American, and they had a great feeling for this sort of thing, and they felt, basically, I think, like I did, and that this is a horrible thing and they were glad that they had something to do with liberating these poor people.

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Q: You had said that you had promised that lawyer that you met that you would not let it happen again.... Then, did you tell people immediately about the camp, or write home about it, or did it take awhile?

A: No, no, I wrote home about it, I wrote home about it, and I came home shortly thereafter, I came home in the fall of 1945, after being in Bavaria because I was high point man, I had lots of points, and I was ready to come home. I came home in about five months later, or some months later, and as a matter of fact when I came home, to Columbus, a lots of my friends who were in The Temple, who didn't have the same attitude towards Israel as I did and were still not committed to the State of Israel, when the Haganah (a few years later when the Haganah started blowing up British lorries,), they complained to me that they were afraid that it would affect the Jews in America andwhy did they need to do all these things, and I would tell them - with a lots of heat - your problem is that you didn't see what I saw. Your problem is that you have never lost anybody, due to the atrocities. Your problem is that you lived in a nice little safe world all your life, and you just don't know what the hell went on with those people. If it takes that for these people to leave Cyprus and get to Israel, I hope they blow up every damn British vehicle they can find.

Q: Did you speak toyour synagogue - or did they ask you?

A: My synagogue didn't ask me to speak about the atrocities, my synagogue never asked me to talk .... I taught Sunday School, I came back home, I uh taught Sunday School, then one year when we didn't have a rabbi at the Temple, I sort of took his place in the Sunday School, and for ten years I was at my Temple, and ended up as a Superintendent of the Temple, but it was a very peculiar thing, no one asked me, when I came back to talk about the Holocaust.

Q: Did anybody ask you questions about .... I am sure you told your immediate family?

A: Friends of mine asked me about it, but as far as hearing about the Holocaust, and being invited to talk to the Temple Brotherhood on it, or talk to the Temple on it, or occupying the pulpit or for that purpose -- never. Never.

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Q: You didn't really talk to that great many people afterwards?

A: I talked to my non-Jewish friends, and I talked to my friends, but I wasn't going to volunteer my services to go to the congregation to tell them, -- I've got a message for them. They knew I had been there, most people knew I had been there, they knew that I was not in the Quartermaster or the Medics or a non-combatant - and I am not making any ugly references to them, but I was a combat soldier who served in an elite combat unit in one of the great Armies in this country and I took pride in that because I was a Jew, and so many times when I was working in my unit, some of the West Pointers and the top Army and tough commanders would come up to me and say -- Ah, Major Cohn..." with that connotation, of what are "you" doing here? You know, we thought most Jews were in non-combat units, although you found Jews in the Infantry and the Cavalry and everywhere else, and this was a thing that we had to dispel too sometimes in the United States Army. I mean I had a couple of bouts with a couple of guys over the fact that when they didn't know I was Jewish.... that you don't see many Jews in combat units and I would tell them, you go to hell.

Q: Did you see the "Holocaust" TV show?

A: Yes.

Q: What about after that, did anybody show any more interest in asking about your experiences?

A: Yes, oh yes. After the "Holocaust" - and incidentally I have a very dear friend of mine in Germany that told me about the reaction about the Holocaust - she is a girl who has a great interest in what happened in Germany; she is so pro-Jewish, this is not her home; she has all of Chaim Potok's books; she has every print on the persecuted... I think she, herself, is almost taking on the guilt complex herself, although she was a wonderful little girl and had nothing to do with it. But, she, I don't think she can ever forgive what some of her countrymen did to the Jews. And there are other Germans that feel this way. But, there was a feeling of indignation, as she told me, among lots of the Germans, to say - "you are trying to punish us now, you are trying to give us a guilt complex, and we are not responsible for them, it didn't happen..." and these kind of things, but you and I know that that damned well did happen

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