Transcript:

Robert Eisenstein

A11

37mm28s

Interviewer: What we're going do is talk a little bit about military situation before, primarily what you knew, didn't know about what your mission was about to evolve. We'll talk a little bit about the pre-military life and we'll focus heavily on the liberation and the actual process of that.

Robert Eisenstein: No, I did not liberate, no.

Interviewer: I know. You are considered though a liberator.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: I know. We've talked about this before. I know you have some unsettled…

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah because I just rode in the jeep. I didn't fight my way in.

Interviewer: You were still there.

Interviewer: But you realize that you were still there. Robert Eisenstein when did you come into Dachau?

Robert Eisenstein: I was trying to figure that out. It had to be, I think the war was actually…our unit ended up in Fürstenfeldbruck, which was a few kilometers from Dachau. There was an airfield nearby and we were in the aircraft so we were called in there. When the war ended that's where we were in this town of Fürstenfeldbruck. We took over. As I told you, I was an adjutant of the battalion and the headquarters took over a city block, took houses of a city block. And in the

basement at each one of these houses, there were shoes in one, clothes in another, gold in another that sort of thing, which you've heard many times. After we've been down there, the AMG; that's the American Military Government sent word to us, "Don't go in the basement." That they're probably… things are boobytrapped, but we had already been in there back, so we knew what was down there and so we inquired… I was trying to think. I've been trying to think all this time why I actually went to Dachau because I knew nothing about concentration camps. I knew nothing about it and we've been over there that long and something must have triggered it because of that stuff we found in the basement. I went down there. I got this jeep and these fellows who could speak German and Yiddish and I went down there.

Interviewer: So it was right as the war end?

Robert Eisenstein: I think the war had just ended. The actual fighting had just ended. The military was still in control of Dachau. People couldn't get in or out. We had to be sprayed with DDT when we went in. Those were the days…

Interviewer: You know what we want are eye witnesses. You were there in the closing days, the prisoners. You know the survivors were still on their camps.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah, they were.

Interviewer: You may not think of yourself as a liberator, but you were certainly an eye witness and we need you tell us.

Robert Eisenstein: We couldn't liberate that little Lithuanian boy…man.

Interviewer: Well, we're going to talk about actually. You're a captain?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: In the army. I want to talk a little bit about that. Tell me a little bit about what you did with the military, your MOS as they say.

Robert Eisenstein: Well, I was drafted from Nashville and you want the process?

Interviewer: Sure. Give me a little rundown on what you did.

Robert Eisenstein: Got it, right here. I went to Fort Oglethorpe and a little side note on that. You know…did you know Emmanuel Schatten? Emmanuel and I went in together. It just happened that we went in together and they gave us an IQ test. And Emmanuel had the highest IQ of anybody in that group that went in, but anyway from Oglethorpe I went to Camp Davis. No, Camp Eustis for a basic training. And then after basic training I was assigned to the Brooklyn National Guard in Fort Hancock, which was in New Jersey right outside in New York. And from there…I was there while war was declared. So I went in and – I've got it down - I went in August of '41 and I was up there and finished basic training at Fort Hancock, and, while we were there, Pearl Harbor happened so the war was declared. In fact, I had to pass to come home to visit [Anne, Anne Finster (sp)], who was going to be my wife and I couldn't get out. I remember that of course, that day. But anyway from there, after being up there for awhile, I went into officer's school, officer's training, the call came out for officers. Then I went to Camp Davis, which is in Virginia and was commissioned and then my first assignment was at Fort Bliss, Texas. And that's where we formed the unit that I joined and I stayed with that unit until the end of the war. At the end of the war, in Fürstenfeldbruck our unit was alerted to go to the Pacific and I did not want to go to the Pacific. I had been overseas now about two or three years and our colonel was hell-bent on going to Pacific, so I was able to get myself transferred out, and I was assigned to an infantry group. And because of my rank, I was made an assistant adjutant in the infantry group. I knew nothing about infantry. And anyway, while I was in Le Havre waiting to come home, they dropped a bomb in Japan and my unit got home before I did. They're already on the high seas, you see and I didn't get home till after they had hit. We were stuck in Le Havre. I vaguely remember there were of storms and we couldn't get on the troopship and get out and so they got home before I did. So you never tried to do anything in the army. You never try to get anything there.

Interviewer: So when were you sent to Germany?

Robert Eisenstein: I've got that right here. I left the United States in April 1943. We went in to Africa. We were in the tail end of African campaign. From Africa, you want the whole program?

Interviewer: Sure.

Robert Eisenstein: From Africa, we went Sicily. That's still in 1943. Italy in 1943. Corsica in 1944 and we stood out D-Day. We're waiting on D-Day while we're in Corsica, as I remember. And we never got called, so we went to Sicily and then we went into Southern France in 1945 and I arrived in Germany in March 1945. And while we were in Italy, we were trained to go in landing at Anzio. Remember Anzio, but we didn't have enough trucks so we had four batteries but not enough trucks, four batteries but not enough trucks so they cancelled us out and they put another unit in our place and they were wiped out almost to a man, so one of those things that happened. That's the story of it.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about… You were in Italy before Germany, right?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: What did you what was going on in Germany?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, we only knew what was going on in our own area. I mean, you know, we're busy. We were being bombed and strafed and we had our own job to do in our own area. The only way we had information really was from periodicals that we got "Stars and Stripes" and those other periodicals that were published. As I remember, we never got anything officially on what was happening somewhere else.

Interviewer: Did you hear the rumors about what was happening to the Jews in Europe?

Robert Eisenstein: No.

Interviewer: You haven't heard anything?

Robert Eisenstein: No. Not a thing. Not a thing. I thought about that, no. I didn't know a thing about it. We were out in the field when Roosevelt died, if you remember that date. I remember that. We haven't reached Fürstenfeldbruck and we were still out…the war was still on when he died. So that information, we got over field

phone. [Hart Joseph (sp)] was telling us how they talked on the phone, you know, and they get images and so on. Nothing like that in World War II, we had field phones. We got a call in our field phone that the president had died. So I remembered that and we were surrounded. We were in a house somewhere, I vaguely remember this. We were in a house somewhere and we were surrounded and we couldn't get out at that time, so I don't know any details of it.

Interviewer: So tell me, you got to Germany in April?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. It says right here. I got landed in Germany in, is that what I said? No March, March 1945.

Interviewer: What date did you liberate-- did you drive your jeep in?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, I was trying to think of that. When was Dachau liberated?

Interviewer: April 11th?

Robert Eisenstein: I think so on April. So this had to be probably in end of April or first part of May because everything was still there. They're all there.

Interviewer: Time from liberation to when you came in three or four weeks later or two weeks later, did you hear anything then?

Robert Eisenstein: No.

Interviewer: Still you knew nothing?

Robert Eisenstein: No.

Interviewer: So driving your jeep in what were you thinking you were going to do?

Robert Eisenstein: Well we saw…we had these things in the basement of the houses we took over, which we're told came from a concentration camp down the road, so we knew something was there. You know, I tried to think about that. I might have known, but I don't remember. It's impossible that I couldn't have known or…

Interviewer: Did you know them to be Jews or just prisoners?

Robert Eisenstein: No. I think I know them to be Jews. I think that I did know; Jews and gypsies. I think I did know that. That's why it took…now you're opening a new thing for me. That's why I took this fellow that could speak Yiddish. These guys were out of our medical unit, so we had a medical unit attached to us and these guys were on our medical unit and they were Jewish. They could speak Yiddish. One of them could speak Yiddish, another one could speak German, but you answered a question, maybe I did know. I don't remember.

Interviewer: I remember you said something about that and I was wondering what made you…

Robert Eisenstein: There had to be a reason.

Interviewer: There was reason why you brought that up.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. Well, I knew I lost some family in Munich. Some of my grandparents and relatives were in Munich and I knew that.

Interviewer: Did you know how?

Robert Eisenstein: No. And we were near Munich and I knew that, but I didn't put two and two…

Interviewer: Your parents were Jewish?

Robert Eisenstein: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Had they told you anything about what is going on?

Robert Eisenstein: No. See, I left in 1941 and I don't remember reading anything at that time. There was probably was something there.

Interviewer: So on your way into Dachau what's the first thing you saw?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, after we got in to Dachau...well the first thing I noticed about Dachau was that it was surrounded by a high wall and we went in the gate right in the middle of town, right in the middle of Dachau.

Interviewer: What about along on the street on your way in?

Robert Eisenstein: Nothing. Just houses, regular houses, just like houses here. When we went in…you want me to describe what I saw, is that what you want?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Eisenstein: Well, there's a big parade ground. I can remember this vividly. There's a big parade ground and there's a flagpole right in the middle of parade ground and the administration building was right behind it. And over to the left as we went in…when we went in the first thing we saw was a group of men were around a big bonfire and they're roasting something. I don't know what. And at that time, I didn't know what, but when we walked up there to look. One man fell into the fire. These things are vivid in my mind. One man fell into the fire. Nobody moved to take that man out. Nobody. So one of these fellows and I went over and we pull that guy out of the fire. He wasn't burned or anything, but you know he'd been in the fire. And we asked why somebody didn't pull these fellows out of the fire. And they said this was the first time they'd seen potatoes that they could roast and eat. That was the answer and I remember that. Now after…it was after that that we met this fellow. I wish I had his picture. I think I did and I lost it. After that, as you went in the parade ground, these cages were over, as I remember, to the left of the compound. Has anybody else told you any of this? This Lothuanian guy told us that they kept dogs in there. Big dogs. They're lining people up in the parade ground as if for announcements and they turn these dogs out. Now, this is what he told us, you

know, I've no way to verify these things. This is what he told us. And then behind the parade ground were these barracks. We rode the jeep down there, down them, between these lines of barracks and people were still in the barracks. They looked at us and we looked at them and nobody says anything to anybody and they looked terrible. And then we went over to the crematorium…this Lithuanian fellow took us to the crematorium and we went into the crematorium. And then I remember behind the barracks and the crematorium, were the cars, the cattle cars. There were some on the track - there was a track behind Dachau itself, this area we were in. There were still those boxcars down there. I remember that. And then somehow we got with these fellows who took us over and showed us the graves that they had to dig and so on. And this Lithuanian kid took us to the officers' quarters which were over maybe to the right, in another area. Beautiful quarters. Just the finest quarters that you've seen anywhere and they were still furnished, the furniture, and nobody disturbed them and we went through those.

Interviewer: What's going through your mind? Not just as an American but as a Jew.

Robert Eisenstein: I got sick. I got sick after this thing, momentarily sick. It was all too much you know. And the thought went through my mind at that time I think these guys living on those nice quarters and at the same time doing these things to people. Dawn, I got to be honest with you. It didn't really dawn on me. It didn't sink into me until I got home and read and heard the discussions of what I saw. We would follow the aircorps around to a certain degree and they…they used us as field artillery too. We had 90-millimeter guns and I can course it consistently…they use us for the armor. But, you know, we get raided all the time…they'd come over at night and even at home when I'd hear it for a while after a while, when I hear an airplane come over, I'd wake up and suddenly get very tense like you're going to, you know, get away from it. It's funny. That sort of thing stuck with me for a long time.

And I'd tell you another thing that I'd thought. These are personal thoughts, but I thought of my children. You see when we came back, you know -- and I had children -- and the boxcars, and what I saw, and I thought, you know, this could happen to us. That did sink in, but afterwards…you know at that time you're busy doing what you're doing. You're thinking about yourself when you're over there and you see awful things, you know, in a war anyway and so to answer you at that very time, I was affected, but not as deeply affected as I was after I got home and got involved and found out the whole story. But as I recall, Eisenhower put out a command, an order that every soldier who was near a concentration camp or camp should go to the camp. I think that's correct. I think I remember that. He wanted the enlisted personnel, the soldiers…

Interviewer: Have you meet any inmates while you were there?

Robert Eisenstein: No. Except this way, just going up and they'd come to us and we go to them, but not meet them, no.

Interviewer: What was the general feeling of the other troops that were there?

Robert Eisenstein: The other fellows over there, we all felt…they felt the same way I did. I can't tell you what their reactions were, but it was terrible.

Interviewer: Can you recall any conversations that you had with them?

Robert Eisenstein: No. I really don't. I really don't. I know we talked about the things that were in the basement of our houses. That alerted us to a lot of things, but no, we really didn't talk about it.

Interviewer: So you brought somebody with you who spoke Yiddish.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah, Yiddish and German. One of them spoke German and one of them spoke Yiddish or the same guy might have spoken both. But see you rang a bell; there was a reason why I did that, so I must have known something. I really must have don't remember it or realize it or didn't realize it, but to take a guy that spoke Yiddish, pick a soldier out like that and I can tell you which one he is -- he's this one right there. There were three or four of us. We all went in the jeep. That's the rest of them that were with me. That's the guy in the middle. These were either dentists or doctors.

Interviewer: They came to assist in their aid.

Robert Eisenstein: No, they pulled out to go with me. They are the medical unit.

Interviewer: OK. How long were you in Dachau?

Robert Eisenstein: I guess maybe three or four hours.

Interviewer: Then what happened? Where did you go from there?

Robert Eisenstein: I went back to camp. Went back to Fürstenfeldbruck, not camp. I went back to our headquarters first in Fürstenfeldbruck. I probably talked about it when I went back there to people.

Interviewer: Do you recall?

Robert Eisenstein: No. I mean, Dawn you're talking about 60 years ago. I remember these other things and I remember these because I looked it up on my record. I don't remember any discussion about it and when you think about it from what we know now, probably the guys in there weren't interested in it.

Interviewer: Tell me about the Lithuanian Jew, the matchmaker.

Robert Eisenstein: He's a little fellow. He's about my size and told us that he had been kept alive because he was a watchmaker and he could make bombs…the intricate part of the bombs and that he had a wife that was nearby and he wants us to take him to his wife, pleaded with us to take him to his wife which we couldn't do.

Interviewer: You knew why he wanted to do that, bring him to his wife?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, he probably wants to take off with his wife and go somewhere. I don't know. I can't answer that.

Interviewer: He didn't say?

Robert Eisenstein: No. And as I remember, he didn't…he just asked us if we take him. He said he had a wife down the road. So there must have been a camp down there. There

must have been a female camp for women. I don't know that. I don't know. We didn't know that.

Interviewer: Where did you go after that?

Robert Eisenstein: Where?

Interviewer: After the camp. Not Dachau…

Robert Eisenstein: After Dachau I went back to the headquarters in Fürstenfeldbruck.

Interviewer: Back to headquarters?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: Where'd you go after the headquarters? How long were you in the service after that?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, I was trying to think of that because I left…let's see if I've got it down here. I was discharged in November of 1945. In those months intervening, I left the unit because I had a disagreement with the colonel on this. He was a full colonel. And it ain't easy to disagree with a full colonel. I was just a captain and he reassigned me. He removed me from the adjutant's post and put me in charge of S4 Quarter Master and so it took me away from him but…and he was a national guard. Wasn't a regular army. I left and as I say, because of my rank, I was put in with…I think it's on here. No, it's not on here. I was put in charge of an infantry group, which you know was terrible. I wasn't anything with infantry and we were all waiting to come home. I think it was the 110th infantry. I'm not sure, but anyway.

Interviewer: So you were in the service for about five or four months after liberation?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. I got out in November. I got back to Nashville and Indiana. I was discharge at Fort Atterbury in Indiana.

Interviewer: And back to Nashville?

Robert Eisenstein: And then came back to Nashville, yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me about that, coming home.

Robert Eisenstein: What's to say? I got discharged. I think we went to Chicago first because my mother was in Chicago.

Interviewer: Did you tell people what you saw?

Robert Eisenstein: No.

Interviewer: How come?

Robert Eisenstein: Not then. Not then. Not right away. No.

Interviewer: Why do you think you didn't tell them?

Robert Eisenstein: I don't know. I don't talk much about it and, in fact, my wife made a point about that. Later on, I talked about it and I got involved with a Holocaust series back at Vanderbilt, got involved in things here. But really, I didn't talk much about it at the time.

Interviewer: Do you know why?

Robert Eisenstein: I think I was deeply affected by it. I really do and I thought that it could happen to us, you know and I related it to my own children. And when this people come in to speak about the holocaust… Bob Mamlin, have you met him yet?

Interviewer: Next.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. He fought his way in. He and I go up and talk to these people, but they aren't interested in that. We tried to talk to them and ask them things, but they don't want to talk to us. I don't know why. In fact, I got in a big argument with a guy at Vanderbilt when in a series about what went on in Dachau. He might have been right from what Felicia said. She said nobody was gassed there and he made the announcement that nobody was killed at Dachau and you know I'd seen this.

Interviewer: Killed and gassed are two different things.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. I'd seen the crematorium. I'd seen this…I raised my hand, which was a terrible mistake and questioned, you know, I throw out the question. "Look, I was there. I saw this." And boy he put me down on me. I remember, he put me down in a hurry. You know you just don't do that. Refute somebody, somebody who's the speaker, but anyway…

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Robert Eisenstein: About?

Interviewer: I mean how do you feel about that? You saw the crematorium.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: You saw evidence of burning.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yet people say that there was no such thing at Dachau. How do you feel about that?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, it's just…it's these deniers, you know it's unbelievable. I mean you react to it like I did and in a public forum, which you don't do, but there was an instant reaction without thinking, I think, and you want to question these people.

Interviewer: What do you want people to know about what happened?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, I think they should know everything. I think they should know everything that happened.

Interviewer: How do you explain the hate? How do you explain the evil of it all?

Robert Eisenstein: I think it's unexplainable. It's hard to explain that. I mean why things are happening today, it's the same sort of thing. Why does somebody get mad and shoot somebody? Why do they lynch people? I mean it's…

Interviewer: Do you think you were more deeply affected as a liberator? I know you reject that term, but for the sake of our argument, let's work with it. Do you think that you were more deeply affected as a liberator because you were Jewish?

Robert Eisenstein: Sure, absolutely. That I'm certain. I have no question about that.

Interviewer: Because as you said, you placed your wife and children there.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. I have no question about that. I felt that very deeply.

Interviewer: Did you have a sense of loss that you hadn't known what was going on until then and that this has been going for five years?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: And just finding out about this?

Robert Eisenstein: No, I don't think so. I don't think so because my intense interest was in another area at that time. It's trite to say this, but when you're in a war, you're sort of looking out for yourself and the guy next to you. You don't have time to do those things. Although, war is the most boring thing that ever could happen and a complete waste of time, but you were still involve in what you're doing and you got people that you have to look out for too. I don't think you necessarily sit down and think those things out at any given time and concentrate on that sort of thing. But I'm sure when I got back there; I was deeply affected in relating what we saw and what we had in the basement in those places and what I saw at the camp. I'm positive of that.

Interviewer: Did you tell your parents?

Robert Eisenstein: My mother, yes. My father has already died, but my mother, yes.

Interviewer: How did she react?

Robert Eisenstein: I can't tell you that. I can't remember that.

Interviewer: Was there anything that led you to believe she may have known what was going on?

Robert Eisenstein: Probably did. Yeah, she was a well-read woman. She probably did. She did and say my father died right in '40, right after I came to Nashville and I'm from Iowa and she was still at home in Iowa and then she moved to Chicago, so she had her own problems at that time.

Interviewer: What brought you to Nashville?

Robert Eisenstein: Employment brought me to Nashville. I graduated in school in 1938 and my father's business was such that he had a broker here in Nashville. The two got together and decided I should come to Nashville to work, so I worked for him in Nashville and I became a travelling salesman. I traveled all through Southern Tennessee and Northern Alabama. I was in the baby food business. I worked for Gerber's baby food.

Interviewer: In the baby food business?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah. Gerber's baby food.

Interviewer: We're going to do a quick tape change.

Robert Eisenstein: Oh, you're taping all that when I'm talking?

Interviewer: Every bit of it.

Robert Eisenstein: [Laughing] Oh, that's bad. That's bad. But you're asking me interesting questions that I can't answer. I really can't, truthfully.

Interviewer: And you know what, it may happen where a couple of months you go, "You know I think I or I didn't know and I'm pretty sure I…" and and those are always opportunities for us to talk again.

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: You can always call me. This doesn't expire.

Robert Eisenstein: Of course these memories are…you know, I could remember pretty much detail on this stuff. As I say, that's a long time ago.

Interviewer: I'm getting a feeling that there's a sense of knowing…there's a sense of knowing that you were about to embark on something really amazing. You had a camera; you had someone that could speak Yiddish. I think there's a sense that maybe you didn't even know how large it was, but there's a definite sense that somewhere within you, you knew that there were something pretty amazing going on.

Robert Eisenstein: I think you're right but…

Interviewer: What was in your basement [unintelligible 0:32:01.9].

Robert Eisenstein: Say that again.

Interviewer: In the basements in the houses?

Robert Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was there? You said you were being tipped off at the time.

Robert Eisenstein: Well, one house had shoes in it. Another house had hair in it. Another house had clothing in it and another house had, believe it or not, gold fillings in it.

Interviewer: Did you find it surprising to see how many homes were around Dachau?

Robert Eisenstein: No, Dachau was a sizable town. It had an airport. Oh that's not a joke, that's why we're there.

Interviewer: I meant around the camp.

Robert Eisenstein: Oh.

Interviewer: Were you surprised to see how many homes? The people lived there? What's going on?

Robert Eisenstein: Yes. We discussed that. Someplace we discussed that. And somebody, I didn't, but somebody went around to those houses and asks if they knew of anything was going on behind the walls and was denied. They didn't knew anything.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, I think it's unbelievable. Unbelievable. But they were right across the street. I mean it's just a city street. That thing was right in the middle of Dachau.

Interviewer: Certainly they heard.

Robert Eisenstein: Oh, they had to hear, had to hear, had to hear. And they had to know. They had to know, those railroad cars going in behind. They had to know. When I – to answer you another way, one day, when we were in the house - I was in one house - a knock came on the door. And there was a woman at the door, a German lady who wanted to speak to Captain Eisenstein. Now, how she knew Captain Eisenstein was in that house is a mystery. We all asked that. That I remember. How in the world did she know? Nobody asked her. We should have. But she wanted to see Captain Eisenstein. Well, they wouldn't let me go to the door. "And why did you want to see Captain Eisenstein?" This is what relayed to me. "I want him to know that this is my house and I want my house back and I help save Jews." I remember that. I remember that. And she helped Jews and the stuff was in the basement, you know. I remember that. That's a detail I remember, but they wouldn't let me go to the door. That's a true story.

Interviewer: How do you wrestle with the memories?

Robert Eisenstein: Pardon me.

Interviewer: How do you deal with memories?

Robert Eisenstein: How do I deal with them?

Interviewer: How do you make sense of it for yourself?

Robert Eisenstein: Well, you can't make sense of some of these things that happened. War isn't very sensible in itself, you know. I can't answer that directly. There's no way to make that sense of what was taking place. I can't respond to that.

Interviewer: Anything else you'd like to add?

Robert Eisenstein: No. I think you've done pretty well.

Interviewer: Have you been sufficiently grilled?

Interviewer: Have you been back at all to any parts of Europe?

Robert Eisenstein: Yes. And my wife wanted to take a trip down the Rhine, wanted to see the castles on there - I've been back to Europe many times, various places - and I did not want to go down the trip down to Rhine. I did not want to be at any part of Germany. I did not want to walk on the street of Germany. That might answer you partway, but she wanted to go. So are you married? You went.

And it was horrible. She didn't like it either. She became very uncomfortable. And we went to one of those towns where is that has Jud Street? Which town…we went to one of this…Germany is beautiful. It's a beautiful city. We occupied other houses. Going back, we occupied other places all through Germany until we got to Fürstenfeldbruck. And incidentally it wasn't too friendly either. We didn't dare walk on the streets without being side-armed and the two of us. And of course, war was going on and the frauleins treated… I don't know whether you want to get in this sort of thing, but the frauleins treated our troops terribly. They'd entice these guys into going at some place with them and then holler "Rape," or something like that, so the poor guys, you know, ended up in trouble. I remember that, it was awful. We got involved in that because we had a battalion. We had about 1200 troops, but anyway, war is interesting.

Interviewer: Very interesting. And I thank you so much for coming out.

Robert Eisenstein: Well, thank you.

J05

Bob Eisenstein

52m32s

Interviewer: We're interviewing Robert, Bob Eisenstein who was a liberator of the concentration camp of the American Army in 1945. I guess for the record Bob, state your whole name and address now.

Bob Eisenstein: All right, Robert D. Eisenstein is the legal name. My home address is 1108 Nichol Lane Nashville, Tennessee.

Interviewer: Were you born in Nashville?

Bob Eisenstein: I was born in Clinton, Iowa, a little town on the Mississippi River. And then I came to Nashville after I graduated from college. I came down here in about 1940, and then was drafted into the army.

Interviewer: Oh, so you came to Nashville before the American were involved in the Second World War?

Bob Eisenstein: Yeah. I was drafted from here.

Interviewer: When were you born?

Bob Eisenstein: In July 13th, 1916.

Interviewer: 1916, okay. So by the time you moved here you were in your 20s?

Bob Eisenstein: Yes, I'm just out of school; it was 1939 so it made me, what, 23.

Interviewer: Where did you go to college?

Bob Eisenstein: University of Chicago.

Interviewer: Did you? And then came here to do what?

Bob Eisenstein: Well, I came here, my father had a business association here, so I came down here to work for a food broker. And I ended up selling baby food for Gerber's. Gerber's baby food and didn't like it. And then Second World War came on, so I was drafted from here, and then during the war I married a Nashville girl, Anne Fensterwald and then came back here after the war. And I've lived here ever since.

Interviewer: When were you drafted?

Bob Eisenstein: I went into the army in, I think it was in the fall of 1941 and…I'll check the record to make sure when I went in the army. August 1941, 13th of August 1941. And do you want the history?

Interviewer: Sure.

Bob Eisenstein: And then I went to Fort Oglethorpe and was assigned…

Interviewer: That's in Georgia.

Bob Eisenstein: In Georgia right at Chattanooga. Let's see. Well, it's part Georgia. Part Tennessee, part Georgia.

Interviewer: Okay.

Bob Eisenstein: And from there I went to Camp Eustis for training, that's, what, North Carolina, South? One of the Carolinas, and for basic training, and then from there I went up to, after I finished basic training I went to Fort Hancock, which is right out of New York City, Sandy Hook, which is a fort that guards the harbor to New York. And I got up there before war was declared. Let's see, the war was declared when? In December 1941, so I was already in place there when war was declared. And I'll never forget. I was in my barracks. I had a pass to come to

Nashville and came over at the loudspeaker that Pearl Harbor, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, so that all passes are rescinded. And we were issued rifles with no ammunition to guard the entrance to New York Harbor. So that's what we did for the next several days. And then things settled down and war was declared and the job became more serious and…

Interviewer: Did they not give you ammunition because they had none or…?

Bob Eisenstein: They had no ammunition. There wasn't any ammunition, at least for us there wasn't any ammunition. I was in a Brooklyn National Guard outfit, that was the assignment, and there were no bullets to give us. We had the guns, but there were no bullets. And that only lasted a short time, shortly thereafter we received ammunition and the proper side arms and so on. And I had different assignments and then I applied for officer's candidate school and was accepted and went to Camp Davis, one of the 90-day wonders at that time.

Interviewer: Where is Camp Davis?

Bob Eisenstein: Camp Davis is, I think, also in the Carolinas, somewhere in the Carolinas.

Interviewer: These were camps that were…that came up in the Second World War and don't exist…

Bob Eisenstein: No. Well, I don't know if they exist now, but they were brand new. Camp Davis looked brand new to me when we got there. And I finished my training there and the first assignment was to Fort Bliss, Texas, where I was assigned at the cadre to form an anti-aircraft gun battalion. The 410 anti-aircraft gun battalion, and I was given the assignment of battalion adjutant, and I remained that throughout the war. 410 remained intact. We formed the organization, we went on maneuvers from Fort Bliss as I remember, around the desert there. And then we went on maneuvers out in California with General Patton and the armored corps, trained out there, and then came back cross-country to New York and shipped overseas, and I landed in Africa in 1943 on Mother's Day. I remember that was Mother's Day, so it had to be in May 1943. It was right at the end of the African Campaign. We landed in Oran. All of our equipment went somewhere else, so we were stranded in Oran and we went into a staging area there until our equipment came. And during that time they were bringing all the prisoners back from the African Campaign. And then from there when

we received our equipment, we had assignments all across Africa. I went to Tunis…

Interviewer: This was an anti-aircraft artillery?

Bob Eisenstein: An anti-aircraft artillery, 90-mm guns. We were a good-size outfit, we had four batteries, headquarters, medical, a medical corps. I'd say we were well over a thousand men. And we stayed intact, the 410th, we went from Africa to…I think we went into Italy, Sardinia, Corsica. We waited out the invasion of Europe in Corsica, waiting to see if we had to go in, but we were semi-mobile, we didn't have enough trucks. So we didn't go in. We were trained for Anzio and we were saved that campaign because we didn't have enough trucks. We trained with the Navy for that campaign and then…as I say, we waited in Sardinia until the continent was secure, and then we went in to Southern France.

Interviewer: Could you talk about all of the sorts of action that you saw?

Bob Eisenstein: We mostly were with the air corps, because it was our job to guard the airfields with the…so we had 90-mms as I said, anti-aircraft guns. And we mostly went with the air corps and guarded the positions or harbors. We were in Naples for a while and guarded Naples's harbor from—they used our guns as artillery pieces, as well as to get at aircraft. And so the trajectory was such we could use for ground fire or from hills down to the sea or into the air to get the airplanes.

Interviewer: And were the bases and other places that you were protecting attacked by German aircraft?

Bob Eisenstein: Yeah. We were attacked when we were landing in…well we were attacked when we were landing in Sicily, our boats were attacked, but we came over in LCTs or LSTs or LCDs depending upon how we moved, and we were attacked both in…and we landed in Palermo and then the worst attack was in Naples when we landed, we were with some armored corps there. And as our boats were…it was, I don't know you call this, but it was the time when Naples was bombed and the public buildings in Naples were being blown up by the Germans. And when we landed we were dive-bombed in strafe by a German aircraft and we were in a hurry to get the guns off and get the tanks off. One vivid memory I have was we were already out, waiting to be moved out and the tanks were coming off these LSTs. And the ramps dropped and there were big, thick hawsers on those boats attached to these stations on a pier, you know

what I'm talking about, these great big things on the pier. And the hawsers were, oh boy, tremendous in diameter. And one tank came off and severed the hawser, and that thing was like a whip. It just went back and forth, knocking people down just like toy soldiers, just all through that harbor. Everybody had to scramble to get out of the way until that stopped, same time we're being bombed. And so we went into the closest buildings we could get to for shelter because we couldn't set up anything for our own protection, and after what seemed like eternity, what I think is probably 10 to 15 minutes, the airplanes left. And we grouped and we moved into our positions, and we stayed in a place called [Necita (sp) 0:10:32.9], which was right outside of Italy, outside of Naples. We were there for several months and that's where we trained for Anzio and our job there was to guard the harbor of Naples. The batteries, the headquarters was in [Necita (sp) 0:10:47.4] which was an island outside of Italy, outside of Naples and our batteries were scattered again, but then we had four gun batteries, they were scattered around the harbor. And since I was an adjutant I stayed in the headquarters with the colonel. Then we were not involved in Anzio, we did not get involved in Cassino if you remember them going up into Northern Italy. And then as I said we moved into Southern France and worked our way out.

Interviewer: So this is now after the D-day?

Bob Eisenstein: After D-day.

Interviewer: And they opened up a front in the south of France?

Bob Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you went what? By ship?

Bob Eisenstein: We went by ship and landed in Southern France, nothing happened there. Then we re-grouped. It was already secured by the Allied Forces by the time we got there. Then we worked our up and got back into the battle again through Southern France and we were close to the Battle of Bulge in that area. We were in, as I remember, Sarreguemines about that time, which is right on the border. And they came down to take some of our personnel to fill in for the Battle of Bulge was being devastating, and I was saved because I wore glasses. I was a captain at that time, and they didn't want any gun captains with glasses. They were didn't want anybody operating gun batteries if a guy wore glasses, so I was

saved on that one. And they took some men, didn't take many. And then as the war progressed we went into Germany, I remember one place we were in Damstadt, Germany, which we had set up batteries and we were going to set up a headquarters and had been firebombed. That's one town that was absolutely obliterated [unintelligible 0:12:43] aircorps had firebombed it. There wasn't a thing standing and we took…our colonel decided we were going to take the only standing building in the city of Darmstadt for our headquarters. And we took over this building, and we were a sizable headquarters for that many guns. And we had settled down and the colonel was somewhere, and all of a sudden a group of motorcycles came up with side cars. There were the foregoers of Patton's army which was coming…we were attached then to the…we were attached to various armies. As I recall, we were attached to the seventh army at that time. And I forget what army he was, but he was on his way and he was going to come to Darmstadt and he wanted our building whoever the officer was that was coming up ahead of him decided they were going to have this building for their headquarters. So I said, "Just a minute, I'm just a captain and I'll go up and talk to the colonel." And the colonel said you tell them that this is our building and we're not going to vacate, words to that effect. And I said, "Colonel, you better come down and tell him that you're not going to vacate." He said, "Eisenstein, you tell them we're not going to vacate." So I told them we're not going to vacate. And I forget what officer it was. And he said, "Yes you are," words to that effect. Well, to make the long story short, we left. And Colonel Patton came in…well, we didn't have anything to do with Patton. That was a time when they were moving very fast.

Interviewer: Did you see anything of Germans during this whole period of time, prisoners…

Bob Eisenstein: Prisoners, yeah we saw prisoners constantly, and we had brushes with Germans. We were not in the front lines because of the size of our guns and our positions. The only time we would see Germans, or the enemies so to speak, is if we got in a jeep. Like the colonel decided one day we were going to go out and reconnoiter and see just how far away our battalions were, as far as the army was concerned, frontline was concerned. And I remember a couple of times we were under fire; we had to get out of the jeep. I got under the jeep. He got under the jeep. That sort of thing. And there was crossfire. I never was in a position where I was in a trench and fired a gun at a soldier, I never was in that position. And one time, our battalion was along one of the autobahns and that was the first time I'd ever had experience with a jet. The Germans already had jets and they used the autobahns as runways and they had their hangers alongside the autobahn under revetments and they were completely camouflaged. And we were strafed by a jet, our battalion was strafed by a jet once, we were moving from one position to the other. And it was so fast that's my first experience, you didn't know what happened, zoom, you were strafed and they were gone. Fortunately, there were no casualties either they were

poor shots or in too much of a hurry, but they…we saw damaged aircraft all up and down the autobahns where the Allied Forces had had. And going back a little bit, in Corsica we were set up around the harbor and we would come into play when the airplanes would come over and start bombing the harbor. Then we would go into action and the headquarters would have its gun room where…the technology wasn't what it was today. They didn't have all the electronic equipment. And you had mobile units, radars that tracked the airplanes. And then in the gun room you'd have a chart of where the airplanes were, and it was the job of the gun officer for the battalion to direct the fire of the various gun batteries into wherever they saw them. So that was our type of an operation.

Interviewer: When you describe your operation and where you were, you really were in basically every theater on the American side in Europe. Africa, Sicily, Italy, Southern France cross into Germany.

Bob Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: You are a Jew; did you know what was happening as to the Jewish people?

Bob Eisenstein: No, I did not. I did not. We never did receive any of this information. At least I didn't. If it came down, I never saw it. I didn't realized what was going on. I knew about it before I went in the army because I knew what was going on in Germany, but during that period you're thinking about yourself and the people around you rather than what might be going on in other places really, unless it was brought to your attention. And I don't remember any information coming about the concentration camps, I really don't. And it was interesting the two liberators that we interviewed previously had not received any word about it either. So that was…I wasn't the only one that didn't know. Now, how I did find out about it was as the war was winding down, we went into Germany, we set up headquarters and gun battalions in various parts of Germany as we worked our way through. We ended up—when the war was winding down, this was in…it had to be March or April of 1945—we ended up in a town called Fürstenfeldbruck, which was an airbase. And it was our job to set up gun battalions around this air base to keep the Germans from coming back. And at the time we got there it was full of prisoners. And the Allied Force, whatever army it was that was in charge of that sector, had set up four tanks at the edge of the airfield, each corner of the airfield, which was the only way they kept the prisoners in there. These were all German prisoners and if they went across the line they get shot by the tanks that was the sum of it, but shortly after we got in there, they moved out. The tanks moved out, the prisoners moved out. Where

they went, I don't know, but we set up. Then the war was winding down so we were de-organized. They took the gun battalions away from us and made us into a group headquarters from many battalions. We became…I think 561st group headquarters battalion. So we suddenly became much bigger, but didn't have any fighting capability. We weren't in direct contact with gun battalions, we're administrative. And we stayed in Fürstenfeldbruck and we took over a city block for our headquarters. And this is the first I knew about these horrors, and Fürstenfeldbruck was not far from Munich and not far from Dachau, as I remember it was about an hour's drive from Dachau. The house I was in, there were several of us in this house, had a basement full of shoes. The house next to us had a basement full of human hair. The house next to that had a basement full of clothing. And this went on and on and on for about five houses in the city block. And the government had issued orders or somebody, the army had issued orders, we were not to go down in those basements because they felt these things were booby-trapped and there were clothing and human hair from a concentration camp known as Dachau up the road.

Interviewer: Okay, this is tape 2, June 10th, Bob Eisenstein. Bob, go back into this town. You had become an administrative unit. You took over a whole city block?

Bob Eisenstein: We took over a city block.

Interviewer: What size city is this?

Bob Eisenstein: Before we had been deactivated as the 410 gun battalion, we had already taken over this city block. It was…Fürstenfeldbruck as I recall was a fairly good-sized town, it wasn't little, but it wasn't big, but it was a typical country town, sort of rural I think.

Interviewer: And this was March or April?

Bob Eisenstein: This was probably…the war ended in May so this had to be latter part of March or middle March and then first part of April.

Interviewer: And some of the houses that you had taken over had hair, shoes, clothing…

Bob Eisenstein: These houses had been…we put the people out. And we took over the houses.

Interviewer: And these things were there when you took them over?

Bob Eisenstein: They were there. And then one other house had nothing but records in it, which was an inventory of the people that were in Dachau evidently. And they…

Interviewer: And now this was before the liberation of Dachau?

Bob Eisenstein: Well, it must have been because this is April, I think Dachau is liberated sometime in April.

Interviewer: Yes.

Bob Eisenstein: But this had to be before then.

Interviewer: Yes.

Bob Eisenstein: I'm pretty sure.

Interviewer: So at least the American Army at that particular setting knew that there was the camp…

Bob Eisenstein: Yes.

Interviewer: Of course we had known about Dachau.

Bob Eisenstein: Yeah. In fact, the AMG came in, the American Military Government came in and took the records, told us to hands off of everything, took the records. I don't know if they took that stuff out of the basement, I don't recall that. I think the basements were sealed so that we couldn't go down there and nobody go down

there. As I said before, we were informed by our headquarters that they could be booby-trapped and we shouldn't go down there and search.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you thought when you heard of those things being in the basement?

Bob Eisenstein: Well, I know we were curious. We want to go down and look, and I think we did, and we inquired the best we could of what was going on. And it's the story that everybody knows. Nobody in the area knew anything about it. And we were only told that it was from something being done at a camp up the road, and that's really all we knew about it. Inquiries didn't get very far as you can understand. The populace in Fürstenfeldbruck was not friendly at all. You did not walk around without side arms, and that was true most…all through Germany actually and parts of France because the populace wasn't friendly to any Allied Army because of the fact the area had been bombed so severely. And I guess it depended upon the frame of mind the people you were with, whether they were friends of yours, whether you saved them from something or hadn't. Every place we went, we took over places to live for our headquarters. The batteries had tents, and they set up camps and tents, but our headquarters we took…in France I remember, in Sarreguemines we took over a downtown street. We used a storefront for our headquarters and then we had houses nearby where we slept. And the people in those instances were friendly. I remember the lady whose house we took over, took care of the house and she was concerned we were going to damage the house, but she was friendly. In other towns, I remember once we were in Germany, we're at a town called Neustadt, of course there are a lot of Neustadts, but this was close to the Rhine and we took over sort of a…I remember now it was sort of like a castle. And the caretaker…this castle was very friendly, and he and she, it was a couple, was interested that we wouldn't do any harm to the castle. And they came in everyday to see that everything was all right. That sort of thing. But the general populace was not friendly.

Interviewer: So did you hear about Dachau in any other way?

Bob Eisenstein: No.

Interviewer: So how did you finally get that?

Bob Eisenstein: Well, I was there before I went out to Dachau, a knock came on the door at the house where I was, and there were several of us in there, I'd say maybe 10, 11, 12 men there. And somebody went to the door and there was a lady at the door who want to see Captain Eisenstein. She knew a Captain Eisenstein was there. But you know you get a little wary, and they asked questions why it was she wanted to see Captain Eisenstein. This was her house, and she wanted to tell Captain Eisenstein, whom she knew was a Jew, that she had saved many Jews from the Germans, and she wanted her house back. So I went to talk to her, and I don't remember what I told her, but she didn't get her house back, but I don't remember exactly what the conversation was. I remember that incident. Another incident of the type, now this is before we were de-organized, other instances at that type, German girls would wander into the battery areas become friendly with the soldiers and invite the soldiers to go with them. And as soon as the soldiers went with them, they immediately hollered things like rape and caused all kinds of trouble, so the soldier got in trouble. So the soldiers had to be told not to fraternize with this population, that sort of thing went on. So everybody wasn't so friendly with the American soldier. Well, at one point, I decided…why I decided, I don't know. I think it was curiosity more than anything else, I wanted to see Dachau. I want to see what was going on at this camp. So I got a jeep, and I took a man with me whose pictures you have in there. He was a medical corps, a sergeant in the medical corps who could speak Yiddish. Now, I had to know something to know to take that man with me. Now, I can't…I have been trying to figure out why I did that, I can't. I can't truthfully tell you why, but he and I went in a jeep and we went to Dachau. When I got to Dachau, it had been liberated, but probably not too far before the time I got there. Not too much time had elapsed. I can't tell you whether days or what. But we went through the entrance, we were sprayed with DDT because of typhus. We had to loosen all our clothing and they sprayed everything all over, we wanted to know why, and they told us it's because of typhus. And Dachau was right in the middle of the town, right smack in the middle of the town. There were houses on the front side of Dachau, not necessarily on the backside, but on the front side of that, it was a street and there were houses over here. As I recall, it had a real high brick wall with barbed wire on top, and had a rather ornate entrance, big gated entrance where you went in. We went in through that entrance. And it came to a great big wide-open area, and in the middle of that area was a flagpole, and right opposite that area was a big building which we found out was headquarters building. And in those pictures I gave you, on that left hand side as you went in that area, there were big cages. They were are massive cages and we found out those held dogs, big dogs, and a man in that…one of the pictures…

Interviewer: Do you want to take these pictures and show them as you talk?

Bob Eisenstein: This is a picture of me with a guy, the medic who could speak Yiddish, in front of one of the cages. They were empty when they got there. But those cages, as they explained to us—I have to jump ahead a little bit—we met, how I don't know, but we met a Lithuanian Jew who was an inmate there. And he offered to take us around Dachau, and I have his picture. This fellow, I don't have his picture, I thought I did have his picture. I think it's one of the pictures I lost. This fellow was kept alive, he explained to us, because he was a watchmaker, and he was used to make fuses on bombs. And because of his knowledge of setting watches and the inner workings of a watch, he was very useful on setting the mechanism for fuses, so they kept him alive and again he looked very well, he looked rather healthy. And he explained everything that went on in Dachau and he told us that at certain periods of time the inmates were lined up in that yard like you'd lined up for reveille, and they turned the dogs loose. And the one that could shinny up the flagpole the fastest was the one that survived, it was a game. And that went on quite regularly. And then we left…we hadn't met him by this time. We went on our jeep, we went…got out of the jeep and went to an area, and this one I'll never forget. It was chilly, and the inmates were around…there was a group of men around the fire. They were doing something in the fire and we went up to them to find out what they're doing in the fire, it turned out they're roasting potatoes. And while they were standing there roasting these potatoes, one guy, one man fell into the fire, nobody pulled him out of that fire and we ran out, this other fellow and I ran out, and we pulled him out of the fire. And we inquired, the best we could, why didn't you pull this man out of the friend. "These are the first potatoes we've seen. We're interested in cooking those potatoes for ourselves." I'm paraphrasing, but that was the idea. They were so far gone they didn't realize this man had fallen into the fire. They were like robots, had blank looks in their eyes, everything you've read about. And so then somehow or another we latched onto this guy and he started taking us around, and we drove through the barracks area. I had pictures as we went through there; these people were still lying on the shelves that you've heard about where they slept. This is a picture that I took as we went by the barracks area. You had to go through some barbed wire to see it. The inmates were still there. No reaction. It was as though you weren't there and they didn't pay any attention to you at all. There was no privacy and they didn't react in any way to what you're doing. And then this fellow took us around to another building. He said, "I want to show you something." And he took us around to this building. And there was a pile of bones there. That pile is bones, those other two people flanking me are American soldiers. These are bones that came out of the crematorium, and no odor or whatsoever. And he explained to us that that's what they were. And then he took us around another area and where we went was a place where the inmates were required to dig a trench, and these are the inmates, and it must be I who's standing in the middle of them, it looks like somebody…I can't tell. I'm the only uniform in there. These were inmates that were pointing out to us the trench and explaining that they had to dig the trench, and you noticed the crosses on the back of their uniforms, and they were shot and fell into trench. It's as simple as that. I mean they say these things, they said those things very matter-of-factly.

From there, he took us into the crematorium, and this is what really puzzles me because you had a speaker there at the Holocaust lecture several years ago that said, "In Dachau, it wasn't a killing camp," and people were exterminated there. Well, this is a picture of an entrance to the gas chamber, not the crematorium. This is the gas chamber, and on the door is a skull and crossbones. And this is where he explained to us, they would line the people up, naked, strip, given a bar soap and told to go in and take a shower, and instead of a shower, they're gassed to death. And then we went into the crematorium and by the time we got there the ovens were empty. There were no bodies in the ovens and the ovens weren't warm. The doors were open, and I'll never forget this. As I remember there are two ovens, maybe three ovens in this particular building. Sterile clean. The building was sterile clean, and over the top on the back wall behind those ovens was a mural. It showed people washing their hands and under it in German it said, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," I'll never forget that. And it was very clean. Then when I came out of that building, we went down somewhere and I saw this mound with a tarp over it. So I raised the tarp and it was a pile of bodies, skeletons lying there, all shriveled up like they've been pickled, no odor whatsoever. They were just lying there piled up and I immediately became sick and…

Interviewer: Physically?

Bob Eisenstein: Went somewhere else and threw up, I remember that. And then across the field I get…to the back of Dachau, I could see those cattle cars that you read about, where they had obviously brought the people in. There was a spare track back there or maybe a main line, I don't know, but you could see the cars were still there. They hadn't been moved. So this fellow was explaining to us all the things that went on and pleading with us to take us out. He said his wife was in a camp. He's spoke in Yiddish, that's why this fellow with me understood him and carried on the conversation. And he said that his wife he felt was in a camp nearby, would we please take him out of the camp, but we couldn't take him out of the camp. There's no way we could take him out of the camp. So we apologized, I guess, and told him we couldn't do it, but he had not seen his wife, and he felt sure that she was there. There were no women in Dachau, at least he told us there were no women in Dachau, this was…I've never heard of this and read about it anywhere, but this was a concentration camp for women, somewhere in the area, whether it actually existed or not, I don't know.

Interviewer: Ravensbrück was a woman's camp.

Bob Eisenstein: Was it? I don't know how close it is to Dachau. But we couldn't take him out, and he took us in another area where the personnel that staffed the camp lived. They lived, evidently, some of them lived right on the grounds. And there were buildings like you see in an army post, an American Army base today, brick buildings that house officers and enlisted men. That sort of a compound, that's what it was. And we went through it. And he took us in, and they were nicely furnished. He told us that the people that guarded the camp and operated the camp lived in these buildings. So all in all we spent a good part of a day there. And I came back and we left. We tried to make inquiries of the people to see if they knew anything about it. People…I couldn't speak German, he spoke…Yiddish is almost German. This guy could speak. Of course nobody was going to tell us anything. They didn't know anything was going on. The people that lived on the houses, they didn't hear anything, they didn't see anything. We know that here and they had to see, but nobody knew anything. And that was pretty true all through Germany, nobody knew anything about anything. And that's pretty much my story about Dachau.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt when you heard the person in our lecture series say 40 years later Dachau was not a killing camp?

Bob Eisenstein: If you remember, you probably don't…but I stood up and questioned…

Interviewer: Oh I do remember.

Bob Eisenstein: And he put me down in very short order, and I was just horrified and I talked about it to anybody I could talk to. I mentioned it to you, and I told him, I said, "I was there and I saw it." And he said I was wrong that there weren't any mass killings there. But I think that part is right, from what I've read about Dachau, there wasn't an extermination there at the scale that there were at some of these other camps, but there were killings, there is no question about that. Well, I saw the graves, I saw the bones, I saw the bodies, so I knew there were killings there. The sad part of this is, and for my part, I didn't realize that magnitude of what I had see until I really got out of the army and got home. And then read and became involved in Jewish affairs, and the impact of it hit me. And it reached the point where I correlated and remembered the things I saw to where I just couldn't talk about it for a while. There wasn't any situation of danger, but I really…it was so horrible that I didn't feel very happy about talking about it either, so I didn't. And then you go me involved in this Holocaust program, and I've heard much more about everything. But there was a period of time there where everything concerning the army bothered you, and

you had a lot of thoughts about what you'd seen and what you'd done, what had happened.

Interviewer: What do you feel about the liberators that you have interviewed?

Bob Eisenstein: Their experience was pretty much the same as mine. None of the two I talked to knew about the camps until we actually got there. They had not known about Fürstenfeldbruck. They both were based further away, as I recall, than I was. There's one man, I forget which one it was, happened to be driving by with a lieutenant. He was driving a lieutenant and he saw this camp and they went in. He didn't know anything about it, and I asked him specifically if he had—because I was interested—if he had heard anything about it and he hadn't. And the other one had not heard about it. I think after they made inquiries, they learned about it. And one of them said that material came down, as I remember, about the camp from army headquarters. This one man was on Eisenhower's staff, as I recall. And something came out of Eisenhower's headquarters about the camps and that all military personnel should visit the camp, so they can see the horrors that were done. That's correct. I remember now. He did say that. So they made an effort to go to the camps. But as I say, I didn't realize the impact of what I'd seen, especially as a Jew, until I got home, I guess, and really realized the horrible thing. And I would say that had a real impact on me to this day. It's made a very deep feeling within me. And then when I went to Israel and visited Yad Vashem, I couldn't do it. I couldn't go through Yad Vashem. Still can't to this day. I've been to Israel many times. I don't go. I can't go. And I can't see these movies that come out. I didn't go see Shoah. I'm just very uncomfortable, I leave. I get very uncomfortable at some of the lectures we hear. I got very uncomfortable with your story when you told…this last one, I have the tape of it. Sooner or later I'm going to listen again, but I got very uncomfortable. I guess it's just a normal reaction, because when I see my children and my grandchildren, especially at a bar and bat mitzvah, I think the horrors that those other children went through and the parents went through. And I would just relate it that way. It becomes very personal. Of course you can emotionally hurt yourself if you dwell on these things, so you don't too much I guess.

Interviewer: But you may, as you say, not see something or be able to listen, and yet you have supported the education about the Holocaust.

Bob Eisenstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: You must feel it's important for people to know, to face.

Bob Eisenstein: It is and I try to impress upon my own children about what's happened and what went on. They listen, but I don't think they realize it either. The full impact of course can't get to them, but they're dutiful children. They listen to their father, but I think they know.

Interviewer: Bob, I'm intrigued as by one thing you say as much as anything else, that you knew to ask the man who spoke Yiddish to go with you, that there are various levels to our experiences in being, that you don't remember but there was something in you that knew…

Bob Eisenstein: Something triggered me to get that man.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Bob Eisenstein: But I don't know what it was. Somebody maybe that had been there or something that happened in Fürstenfeldbruck. I just don't know. I'm not really sure what made me go to Dachau either. I mean, I said I wanted to see what those things in the basement and the inventory people was all about. I must have heard something and I can't recall what it was. I had to have heard something. I knew about the Nazi atrocities to Jewish people because we ran into that all the way through. My first experience of that was in Tunis because I visited with a Jewish family and they told me about it. And that was my real first experience with Nazism and the SS troops. I think it was in the back of my mind all the way, and this Dachau thing might have been the culmination of all that and led me to it, but I agree with you. There's something had to make me get that man who spoke Yiddish to go with me, because it wasn't a normal thing to do.

Interviewer: Well maybe that's the moral of the story that—

Bob Eisenstein: It could be…

Interviewer: —you want something in the back of all of our minds that will nag us.

Bob Eisenstein: Perhaps, it could be. I haven't thought of it that way. That could be.

Interviewer: Never let it go.

Male: Bobby, do you ever felt sorry that you went there?

Bob Eisenstein: And visited Dachau? No. No, I don't think I was sorry I went there. It was something I should…it was something I should have known. It's something I should have had experience with. No, I can't say I'm glad I went there, but I should have been there. If I had not have gone there, I probably would have visited the camps with a Jewish group today, which would be entirely different than being there during the war. Now, I refuse to go back to Dachau. We've had opportunities to go to Dachau. We've had opportunities to go to the other concentration camps, but I refuse to go. I'm not going to go. And I do question people that I know who have been to Dachau, I question them when they come back, Nashvillians that I know…and it's nothing like it was when I was there. It's entirely different. I ask them questions and those things aren't there.

Interviewer: How do you feel about there being a place like Yad Vashem or the Holocaust memorial that they're building in Washington and the other in New York?

Bob Eisenstein: I'm going to have to answer that because that's due to you. For a while I felt that enough is enough. We keep beating this. We keep beating it and what happened to the Jews, and it happened to the Armenians, it happened to other ethnic groups, why do we keep on this and why do we keep on this? But you have convinced me that it is important, and then the people that I've heard being interviewed and the stories that I've heard from them and the stories that we've heard like the one today, it is important that these things are kept alive, kept for the public, especially before the Jewish community, and they are recorded. And I applaud you for the efforts that you make to keep this Holocaust series. And I'm amazed at the depth of intellectual pursuit that is carried on in the Holocaust. I sometimes object to the objectivity of the speaker in dealing with the Holocaust. In fact, I raised that question once, how could you deal with it and question the motives of the people involved, why did they do this, why did they do that under the circumstances. That I find distasteful, but I see the importance of getting these things on the record, and especially the non-Jewish people have made recordings, they have expressed those feelings too, that people should know about it. And especially these agencies and groups that say there were no such things as concentration camps and the Holocaust. So it's a necessary thing. I'm uncomfortable with it, and I think a lot

of other people are too, because I've made inquiries as I've mentioned to you in the past, why doesn't a Jewish community come out en masse to these lectures? And the answer I get is, it's getting too much. And so I think that pretty much bares out what I'm trying to say except their own.

Interviewer: Do you have anything else you want to add?

Bob Eisenstein: No, I don't think so. I think that pretty well covers the small part I played, not as a liberator but as somebody more or less visiting, because I don't want to go under flying colors, I did not shoot my way in as some of these guys did, I didn't.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you Bob.