

Transcript:

Reverend Bill Harris

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Interviewer: This is Reverend Bill Harris from Fairview, Tennessee, and I'm Bob Eisenstein. And Bill is going to tell us about his experiences during World War II and his entrance into a concentration camp. So Bill, why don't you just go ahead and say what you like to say?

Rev Bill Harris: Okay. I was drafted when I was 19, I had just turned 19. I'm almost as young as anybody can be to have been in World War II. You could be just maybe a year or so younger than I am, but I was younger than most men in our unit. When I was drafted as a boy of 19, my experience was rather limited. I was rather naïve. I remember that everything was strange to me, completely strange. I grew up in a little country place about 40 miles west of Nashville and to me, coming to Nashville then was a big event. I had passed over into a new world coming to Nashville. And just everything about the army was strange and new to me. We had basic training in Fort Stewart, Georgia, hot, sandy, and swampy. And then, we came to Tennessee Maneuvers. We were around in Lebanon and Hartsville and Cookeville and areas like Murfreesboro in Middle Tennessee.

And then in the fall, I guess this was 1944, we were shipped to England. I had that feeling of strangeness going into England. Here's a new country and yet it was the country of my forefathers, and I felt both as a stranger and also I felt a little kinship to the rolling and beautiful countryside of England. We stayed a while in a little town called Blackshaw Moor. We were quarantined for a couple of weeks and after the quarantine, the town gave a dance party. I mean the girls came out to camp and when the music started and the lady who we chaperoned said, "Pick your partner," everybody was reluctant to pick a partner. They never had picked an English partner before. We stayed in England for several weeks and then we went over to the continent and landed in Le Havre, then went on an English ship. And it was an old creaky Christabel, or something like it. I believe it was the name of it. It was really an old ship. And we landed there.

We stayed in France for several days and then the Battle of the Bulge started about that time. And then we were assigned to the First Army. As we started going to the First Army, the Germans had cut communication and we were put in the Third Army, Gen. Patton's Third Army instead of the first. And we had it relatively easy for soldiers. We stayed up into the last march of the US in Luxemburg. Good, warm quarters and we had plenty of good hot food and things of that kind. And then, next assignment outside of Luxemburg was protecting the pontoon bridge as the Third Army had put over the Rhine River at [unintelligible 0:03:42.2]. Now, strange things happened to [redacted] in 1977. I visited. Again, I remembered some of the things. Some had changed, but I couldn't picture in my mind precisely where the pontoon bridge was that crossed the river. So, I went into a little café and there was a German lady about my age sitting there. And I introduced myself and I asked her if she had grown up in [unintelligible0:04:21.0] and she said she had. And I said, "Do you remember the pontoon bridge that we had across the river in World War II in [redacted]?" She says, "No, you never had a bridge here. There never was a pontoon bridge over our river here." I don't know...I don't know whether that period was so traumatic to her that she had just forgotten about it and maybe she didn't actually ever seen the bridge, I don't know. I thought that a little strange that she wouldn't recognize. I knew there was a bridge because I protected it and had several experiences with that that I remember.

From there we went to Frankfurt and then later to Nuremberg. And when we were protecting a forward Austria that was providing supplies to our fellow soldiers. And one evening late at night, this German concentration camp was captured. And I had to go in I guess along with all of our unit the next morning to the concentration camp. General Patton that morning and I think General Eisenhower and General Bradley, all had visited the concentration camp at Ohrdruf and they ordered all soldiers in the area to go into the camp at Ohrdruf. So, I did. I remember it was a beautiful, warm spring morning. It was April 15th, 1945. The sun was shining; it was warm, a beautiful country with the fields of green dotted here and there by forest. The thing that stayed in my mind was the gate. It was a wooded area best that I remember and the gate above it had these words, "Arbeit macht frei": "Work makes you free."

And as I went in, on my right I noticed some barracks and there's a few people that were still living in the camp. And they were staring at us out of the windows with kind of blank stares on the face. I supposed they were afraid that this was just a dream and they were going to wake up and be in this terrible situation there, and lived there and it had been a part of their daily life for a long time again. I don't know. But I remember the barracks. They were A Barracks and B Barracks and C Barracks. And I asked somebody about them why they were A, B, and C. He said that people who first came in, they were still physically strong and they will work, they put them in A Barracks. When they got a little weaker, they put them in B Barracks. And then, they put them on C Barracks...in the C Barracks, that's where they took them: from C Barracks to the gas chambers, to the extermination area.

Now all up above here there was a whole field covered with corpses, bodies in various stages of decomposition. They were emaciated, starved, and just skin and bones, most of them. And they had the German civilians from a town that was nearby up there digging the mass graves, which they fixing to bury all of them. And I remember seeing a man that was kind of fat and greasy-looking. You could tell he had plenty to eat. There's a bullet hole right in his star, right in the center. And I asked someone, I knew he was different was all the rest, what had happened then. He said he had been a guard at that camp and when we captured the camp, right before we captured it, he ran down into the town and changed into civilian clothing. When the first American soldiers had gotten there, rounded up all the people in the town, and made them go up there and march to this area. They wanted them to see what they had done, and one of the inmates saw and recognized him and grabbed a pistol and shot him through the head.

I don't remember Eisenhower and Patton and Bradley, either had already been dead at inspection of the camp, but I remember seeing a lot of high-ranking officers, French, English, as well as Americans there in the general area where I was. And then, we went down to the left of the camp and were shown the, where we walked through. There wasn't anyone guiding us or anything like that. We saw the extermination gas chambers. Where they actually put the gas on the top and killed the people. And right next to the gas chambers were four or five ovens right next to one another where they were cremating the bodies. And outside, there was a vast concrete lined vat. I think that vat was used to put the bodies in, I don't know, maybe where in sometimes they got overloaded and couldn't burn all of them, and put them in that vat. I remember thinking about such beautiful scenery around there, how there could possibly be hidden within that beautiful terrain such evil, death, and darkness, and terror, and torture when nature itself just cried out against that sort of thing.

And there was a strange thing; we've come across this later. The people at that village, which was fairly close, I don't remember how far, but it just wasn't that far from the camp, how they could possibly be that close to something like that and not know what was going on. You really had to be blindfolded and had to stop your nose up too, you just couldn't keep. That was a terrible will they had to prevent knowing what had occurred. And you get to thinking about it. You can't exterminate 10 million people, in all logistics that that implies. You can't do that and nobody know anything about it. It takes a whole lot of work to do and you just come across some, you're bound to. And it was that reluctance to perhaps even admit to oneself what had happened. Now how does one respond to something like this. When I talk about it, in a way, I partially re-experience what I experienced and not as powerful as it was then, but still there's something there that's experienced. I was numbed. I really couldn't take it in. I couldn't say anything...just it didn't...I didn't have words to describe anything like that. I had no way of

describing my feelings. I never had felt anything like that...in war I'd seen dead soldiers, I'd seen bombings, and all of that and wounded people, but I never had seen really anything like this before, a deliberate attempt to kill people. That was the purpose of it, to kill people. And war, I guess you could say the purpose is to gain power for people, but the purpose is not killing in itself. This was...killing itself was the purpose in this, and this. And there's the difference there I think.

Interviewer: Did you get to talk to any of the people in the camp to relate their experiences to you?

Rev Bill Harris: No, no, I don't remember. I remember going through camp and some of them talking to us, but I really don't remember anything they said. But remember talking and some of us were talking to them. We were just asking him general information. They weren't very talkative either. They didn't have very much to say. I remember, after that, I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. It was just...I talked about strangeness of...this was the most strange feeling I'd ever had. And it made me wonder a lot of things and I still do. I wondered for example, I'm a Christian, we've been taught forgiveness. But how could you ask, for example, a mother who had had her child tortured and killed. How could you ask her to forgive someone? I don't know. I haven't experienced that. But it seems to me like it will be almost too much to ask of a human being, forgiveness in a situation like that.

So, I wonder, if all things, I wonder if we—I'm speaking as a Christian—have really confronted that. It seemed to me like we need to rethink a lot of our theological views and concepts in the light of that. I don't know what the answer would be as it's a work that we need to do. We really haven't confronted that. After all, I hate to mention this, but after all, it's a fact. Adolf Hitler was on the tax roll of the church in Germany. Hermann Goering, as far as I know was a member in good standing in one of the greater churches in Berlin, Protestant Church. A lot of these people who were doing this recruit work were Christians. I would say they weren't very good ones, that goes without saying. But still, that is related in some way and I'm not a philosopher to be able to make a connection, but there is something related that the prejudice has been in the church, all these many years.

It has made me wonder about prejudice itself. Is prejudice something that...suppose that there were no such thing as antisemitism. Does man don't just get another group that he's

prejudiced toward? Does the prejudice itself just go away or is it just shifted to another group? I don't know. I kind of have a feeling, it's always there. And another thing that I think of in connection with this, I don't think we'll ever be much better as a people until we confront the inexhaustible nature of evil that lies in the depth of our heart. What I mean by that, the evil of which under certain circumstances we are capable. Is this something just...This, of course, is something that Germans did, but is this something that's endemic to humanity as such or just to the Germans? Are the Germans unique in that respect? Or did just evil go to an extent further in them than it's perhaps had gone than the rest of us? And what does this do to people? Am I capable of it under certain circumstances? And this raises a whole question of what an "I" is. It seems to me like if I were to do something of this nature, it would no longer be me. I'd have a different character than I have. I would have to make a decision that would qualify my character, qualify my being. I would be someone different in the future. So I guess that question really doesn't make much sense when you ask, "Could I have done something like that?" Not now, my character, but I would have been a different character, if I had been raised on a different community and so forth and made different decisions in my life. But this big decision, if I were to do something like that, would from henceforth, it seems to me like characterized a different kind of character than I have now.

Interviewer: What your job was in the army if you're a gunner or whatever you were—?

Rev Bill Harris: if I miss some of that, you go ahead and—

Interviewer: I don't want to stop you. You're doing great. I didn't want to interrupt you. You're just...

Rev Bill Harris: I think it takes a while for something like this to sink in. I don't remember really...I don't remember and this is kind of strange because we had a very close relationship within our unit and we still do. We still meet annually. We still have newsletter and keep up with one another. And of course this indicates that our affection and admiration for another is something that lives on. But I really don't remember talking much about it afterwards. I think there is something in me there as well as the Germans, too, you really don't want to confront something like that. There's something in you that resists it. I can understand in a way why they resisted because I resisted it too, at first. But I would always come back to it in my thoughts, thinking about it. It probably has

something to do with maybe a minister later on, and this gave me even more opportunity to try to think it through, theologically.

Interviewer: Well, you became a minister after you left the army?

Rev Bill Harris: Oh yeah, good while afterward, in fact.

Interviewer: And this left a lasting impression on your theological thinking, if you want to put it that way.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah, yeah. Everything has to be rethought and it still does...I haven't, quite honestly, I haven't gotten through that process yet. It will probably take somebody in the future generations that can look at it more objectively to really deal with it. I don't think in our church, and as far as I know, no modern theologians have...I'm not acquainted with Jewish theologians as much except just a few like Martin Buber, I'm aware of him and I believe he did most of his work before this event and Abraham Heschel and a few and Elie Wiesel. Is that the way you pronounce his name?

Interviewer: Wiesel. Wiesel.

Rev Bill Harris: Okay. I'm acquainted with his writings. He's no theologian, but I'm acquainted with his writing and I'm acquainted with some of his books that he's written on this. He was an actual victim of it, of this event. My unit was 565th Anti-Aircraft Battalion and we're all automatic weapons with 40-mm guns. And we had 50 caliber machine guns. And my job was range setter. We had a little...I guess that was about to put the closest thing they had to a computer back in those days. We had a little range setter. Do you remember? It must have been about a yard square, and it had a clutch on it. Here, you could push it around, and on each side they had a telescope, one of them lateral and the other vertical. And you had a vertical tracker, what we call on one side, a vertical tracker and a lateral tracker. So my job was to push this director around when a plane appeared on the horizon, get on the plane, and soon as the telescopes got on it, with the trackers, I

would turn lose the clutch and they will start tracking it. And then, the gunner was following the plane around with the gun and he would push in the clutch when I let go of my clutch. And I would put in then on a little dial the number of yards, I think it was yards rather than feet the plane was away. And of course, all of the shells were burning. You could see where you were shooting. If you were shooting below the plane, you knew we hadn't put in enough yards. But if the plane was flying towards you, you was getting closer all the time. You could regulate that by putting in that. I was thinking driving up here, I really don't know whether...I don't suspect we were worth our money that the US government spent on us, or we didn't do too much damage. But I was, we may have shot down two or three planes, but that would be literally hundreds of guns shooting at them, you know. Strange sometimes I do a little substitute teaching in high school, on high school level, and the children are always the first to ask me, "Did you ever kill anybody?" That's always the first thing. And I really don't know. So many gun shooting, I don't know what my gun did, but I could have, so I'm just as guilty as if I did. It don't make any difference as far as guilt is concerned, you'd be guilty one way or the other.

Interviewer: Did you ever go back to the camp after that first visit?

Rev Bill Harris: No, and I was that close, and I didn't. And that, too, is a little strange. I thought I wanted to go back to it, but I was always just planning something else. And there may have been kind of reluctance on my part to really face it again. I don't know whether that was the case or not. I suspect that if I stayed there long enough, I would have gone back.

Interviewer: Were you briefed on the concentration camp before you went in?

Rev Bill Harris: No, no. We were just ordered to go and just went. That's all I remember about it. The people that had us go, I don't think they had gone themselves. They just got the orders, I think they come down from high headquarters and General Eisenhower himself that all the troops in the immediate area would go where he wanted to see that.

Interviewer: Women or just men in that camp, do you remember?

Rev Bill Harris: You know, I'm not too sure, but I don't remember actually seeing a woman. It seemed to me like there were men. I would guess men. Doesn't mean there couldn't have been. I didn't see the whole of them and I don't remember seeing any women in the camp. And I really don't know who these people being killed here where. I don't know whether they're Jews or whether they were political prisoners or what. I do know the Germans wanted first to get all the work they could out of them, and then, they killed them. It was a little different I suppose and whether the purpose of the camp was purely extermination like Auschwitz and some of the other camps. I'm not sure about that.

Interviewer: Was there a high wall around this camp that separated from the town itself?

Rev Bill Harris: There was barbed wire, a big high barbed wire fence to the best I remember, just like a camp, a prisoner of war camp, except the fence was extraordinarily high. I remember that. It is as high as this room, ceiling here is or maybe higher. It was high. It wasn't the kind of a fence as where you would particularly notice it. And the irony of it is really in the kind of a beautiful little setting.

Interviewer: Did you see any boxcars in that camp?

Rev Bill Harris: I don't remember seeing any. If I saw any there were, they were down around where the cremation ovens were...I think they had a little railroad in there close to it. They didn't have that one at the town. That was one of the strange things. How even the German people in that little town, being so close to that, you have to be some kind of genius not to know what was going on. I mean it had to be...it looked like a planned thing. You really had to close your eyes. And I guess this says something about us, too. There's really reluctance to face the truth about us, if the truth is not so pleasant. And the thing it, I suppose, it gives us hope here

that just as man's capacity for evil is almost inexhaustible, there's also a capacity for good at the same time. And we hope God's grace is greater than the capacity for evil. I will give you an example of a few cases of really experiencing something that was noble. We were going across the ocean, big convoy, and we were in the middle lane, I believe there were three lines. There was a good many over a hundred ships I think in that convoy. And the officers of the convoy were in that same ship where we were on. And I remember it was a real big ship that's been a luxury liner and had been converted into a troop ship. And I remember being very crowded and one day, we all had life jackets. We got these rumors everyday about German submarines all around, and we could see the American destroyers and other ships circling the convoy, all the way. But I took a shower one day and then I hung it up, took off my life jacket and then hung it up outside the shower room, went in, took a shower, and when I came back, there's no life jacket. And I don't know whether somebody had taken it by accident or whether somebody just stole it and lost his or something. But I went to our executive's officer named 1st Lt. Spencer from Memphis, Tennessee, and I told him I didn't have a life jacket. Somebody stole it. And he says, "Well, I'll go to ship supply and get you one. So, he went to the ship supply to get one and they didn't have any more. And he came back and he gave me, I guess he saw that that disturbed me. I was disturbed. And he gave me his jacket. Now, that was a noble thing for him to do. To put his life in jeopardy for mine. He just showed a nobleness of character there, and when things of like that occur, they give you a little hope along the way, too.

Interviewer: Balances out the good and the evil.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah, I don't know whether it balances or not, but it gives you a little something to stand on when you're down and out. And you experience several things like that and people will put their lives in jeopardy for you. And that's a strange thing when you get to thinking about it, isn't it? The difference in that, now, the only relationship we had with one another was we were members of that unit and we were both Americans. But you get on a trolley or something like that, like in New York City, you wouldn't find too many people to be...But sometimes, you do, like that fellow in Washington, you know, the fellow in the aircraft that fell in that Potomac River years ago. One fellow did put his life in jeopardy

and swam out and rescued this other person in the Potomac River. So, it does happen.

Interviewer: And just to get back to that camp, one more time. In your opinion, was that a work camp rather than a killing camp?

Rev Bill Harris: It was, well it was both, and the workers that came there, they didn't have much chance of surviving very long because it was organized as an efficient killing machine. They had the gas chambers. It wasn't just the fact that every now and then somebody was going to be executed. It was a daily sort of thing. So you couldn't say just for work. But they utilized it for work to get everything they could. Germans I guess, they have kind of an efficiency about it. They try to get everything they can and they try to get every bit of the work that is available, these people, before they were done away with. Another question that springs up, not very pleasant, but something I guess we should face, is a question of suicide. Sometimes...of course this is not anything I've experienced but really a lot of people experienced it. Sometimes, a mother would have to decide which one of her children are going to the gas chamber. Now, if she didn't decide, both of them were. Now, can a mother you suppose live after making such a decision as that? That's the kind of decision no human being should have ever to make, but once they do make it, can they really live on themselves afterward? I kind of doubt that. Sometimes, a man would have to choose between his mother and his wife, for example. Because this is just pure terror, torture, which happened.

Interviewer: Did you see any areas of this torture in that camp where they did physical torture? Did you get into those areas at all?

Rev Bill Harris: No, I don't remember going in any places specific before that. In fact I don't remember going around anywhere where the headquarters buildings were at all. I don't remember even going in that area. I do remember that they had a place, I believe it was to the right of the camp as we went in where the personnel live, neat little huts and all of that. I remember that, but I didn't even go in those.

Interviewer: When you had your pulpit before you retired, did this cause you to do any preaching about this sort of thing?

Rev Bill Harris: Yes, some of it directly, some of it indirectly about confronting evil within us. And it made me...I think as to perhaps anybody that's experienced something like this is you...one of the great sins that you think of in a religious community is the trivialization of faith to make it something trivial. Faith, it was really...it has got to deal with these problems. The deepest problems of human existence. And it doesn't deal with all those. You don't need it. Something has to deal with this; some philosophy, something has to deal with these deepest issues of the human spirit and soul. In that sense, it did. And the other thing that bothers you, it bothered me as a minister and still does in the religious community, is to imply that if one has faith, everything will be fine. That wasn't true. A lot of these people had faith, everything wasn't fine, and everything is not fine if you have faith. That's false to me. It is false to tell people that because it just isn't true. And the use of God's name in a way that...well, I guess, trivial is the best way to put it, making God a being who just runs around taking care of whatever we happen to need at the time. As it's put now, taking care of our needs, that to me isn't a kind of a trivialization of God—after all, needs are insatiable, to fill this need and I got ten more. It'd keep God busy.

Interviewer: Bill, just to close off, how would you summarize your experience at that camp? Bill, you were going to summarize your experiences at the camps as an ending to the interview?

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah, I think what the camp does, as I said a while ago, was that you literally can't take it in. I'm not sure that I've taken it in yet, all of it. At first, the effect was so profound on me, you kind of...you experience something I guess like death. You become numb. You can't speak. You can't eat. You can't sleep. And the way all things stop, thought stops. There's no categories in which you can explain anything. You don't have the vocabulary for it. And you have experienced something so horrible that in a way makes everything that you've experienced up until that time kind

of meaningless. And you have to start over again. In a way, you have to start your life. It is that kind of an event in life, I suppose we all have some of those events in our life in which we went up to a certain point and then we had to change. Like Robert Frost says, there's a fork in the road and you go this way or that way. I'd been going particular way and I couldn't go that way anymore. I couldn't think that way anymore. One of the things I thought is I guess it came in my mind, reading it one time from the French writer, Camus. He said that if there's one child that unjustly suffers in the world, it causes God's justice to be called into question. When we think about the Holocaust, we think about the vast number and that does make it, in a way, worse, but even if one child is tortured, that's too many. In principle, it's just as bad in a way for that one child to be tortured and killed as it is for a million. The million don't make it any worse in principle. Of course, it does in actual existence because more people are involved. Of course, it's worse. But in the nature of reality itself it doesn't make that much difference. And I think our task is still one Camus said, is to create a community where children are not tortured and that really means creating I guess a community where none of us are tortured, where we can live open, free, in full existence. And that means providing in our communities as a kind of life that is good for everyone. I talked about needs a while ago, but there are certain needs that everybody has. Children and all of us need a certain...you have to have food to exist and you have to have shelter, clothing. Now, you need medical care and we ought to provide that kind of society, a kind of community for our people, I think.

Interviewer: That would be a good place to end. I think that's very good.

Interviewer 2: I've got one question. You said it was a work camp, what type of work did they make the prisoners do? Could you tell?

Rev Bill Harris: I don't know. I don't remember there being any specific industries around there, there could have been. My particular...I was focused on that camp and I didn't really notice anything else much. But whatever industry there was they didn't...They probably had them work on farms and probably had them help some of their farmers, I suspect. They were probably low on help, you know, the farmers were, you know their children going

into the German Army and what have you, and things of that nature I guess. And then, the ultimate purpose was to exterminate them, too.

Interviewer 2: Do you still see those people's faces?

Rev Bill Harris: No, not specific. The only one I see is that fellow with a bullet hole. I remember how he looked because he was so different from all the others, yeah. He was wealthy, it was apparent, and he was very different from the others and had suffered differently from the others. I see the whole group, on the side of the hill, but I don't...In fact, they all kind of looked alike. They were all emaciated and just skin and bones.

Interviewer: Do they have the striped uniforms?

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah. I remember seeing some striped uniforms, yeah.

Interviewer 2: You said that you really didn't speak to any of them, you didn't have to, did you?

Rev Bill Harris: No, but we did going out, I said we didn't speak to many. I remember just in...I remember what it seemed like when we went through the barracks, we stopped and talked to one, we're asking somebody, I guess, it was maybe where I got the information about this fellow that had the bullet hole.

Interviewer: Did you take any pictures?

Rev Bill Harris: No, I didn't have any camera, but some people did and I'm...We not only had a battalion reunion once a year, we have a battery reunion, smaller unit, and I meet in a couple of weeks at Pigeon Forge. And some of the fellas had took pictures I'm sure, but I didn't. I didn't have a camera.

Interviewer 2: Why do you think your unit was taken out there to see things?

Rev Bill Harris: General Eisenhower said he wants us to know what we've been fighting against. He wanted us to see the evil of the Nazi regime, and General Eisenhower, although later, I guess he maintained he was fearful of the Germans, too. So, he wanted this experience to sink in I think.

Interviewer: The war was over at that point. The actual fighting had ended and at that time you kind of—

Rev Bill Harris: Now, they were still fighting, but not much. There wasn't much fight left in the Germans. We were kind of running on one another to get...see how many miles you can make in a day, but I remember right before going there, we went through the woods to get to Austria that we were protecting at that time and there's still some German, dead German soldiers that had just been killed, there was a tank which had just been knocked down. So, there was still some fighting, but it was sporadic. But everybody knew the war was essentially over and the Germans did, too. I remember just along about this time, I don't know if it was a little before or a little afterwards, but we were kind of halfway lost and we wound up at the right spot, but we didn't know which right spot. We wound up at another German airfield. And that's where I saw, I remember the first jet plane. It's a brand new jet German plane on that airfield. And we really, we got there at night and we really didn't know where we were. And I remember we built a fire to cook us something to eat and it's still a little bit chilled, and it was about this time of year, a little bit earlier I guess. And the next morning, all these American tanks were in the back of us. We were in front of them. We didn't have any idea—they went across the field and there were thousands and thousands of German soldiers right across that field, airfield, surrendered that next morning. We saw them marching back.

Interviewer: Did you talk to any of the townspeople? Did your unit talk to any of the townspeople around that camp?

Rev Bill Harris: Not much. That was an order then, no fraternization. You remember that I'm pretty sure, and so we didn't talk too much to the German people. They were really on one spot and I was on another. There wasn't any chance really much to talk. There was after the war is over but not at that particular time. Well, I guess everything has turned all right.

Interviewer: That's it. What was inside of the barracks?

Rev Bill Harris: Well, I remember going in these barracks. As I said, there's A, B, and C. And little beds that weren't very long and it were just wooden, one on top of the other. It seemed like there's three or four, up on top of one another. And little bowls, and the barracks were very thin-walled. I mean, it would be terrible cold, I know it, in the wintertime. It just looked like a place you'd have for dogs or something. That little bowls or little place for them to lay down and that was about all the barracks consisted of.

Interviewer: Was there a curtain over the front of it? Did you see a curtain or anything for privacy? Anything over the front of the—

Rev Bill Harris: No, I don't remember seeing anything like that. No privacy.

Interviewer: There wasn't?

Rev Bill Harris: No.

Interviewer: Any other things you can think of that nature?

Rev Bill Harris: I think you said something about the dogs that were let loose on them. I think what they did, I guess they did as maybe as a system of control is to dehumanize a person, to make him detest

himself, make him do things in order to save his life. And afterwards he always detests himself, can't stand himself. This is the way they dehumanize you. They made you punish yourself. That's what it is. You get to despising yourself. There's nothing anybody else can do much against it. You do it all yourself now. And they were masters at doing this, in humiliating the people.

Interviewer: You mentioned that vat that you saw, did you see any mass graves there that...You talked about earlier in your interview about the graves that they were going to bury these bodies in.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you see any other areas of mass graves that had been dug?

Rev Bill Harris: No, I don't remember that. There seemed to me like in the back there, there was kind of mounds, but I'm not too sure of that. That's kind of vague in my mind. I do remember that, lined vat, and I suppose it seemed like that somebody told me that that itself was used to eat up the bodies, to dispose the bodies.

Interviewer: Did you notice on the back of those striped uniforms, there was a round circle and a dot right in the middle of it, on the back of each uniform?

Rev Bill Harris: I remember something about that. Yes, it seemed like, yeah. That don't particularly stand out, but since you mentioned it, I remember it now, yeah. Well, we can just hope that nothing like that ever happens again.

Interviewer: Do you have any opinion of this? This is astray a little bit, but do you have any opinion about the reunification of Germany along with this?

Rev Bill Harris: I wonder about several things. I think it's going to be a hard job to draw the boundaries for any peace treaty in Europe. If Poland, for example, gets any territory that has traditionally from almost the beginning been a particular German city, I wonder if that won't cause problems down the way somewhere. I'm inclined to favor unification, but I don't think it should be done quickly. There's a lot of things to take into account. And I don't know whether you can ever...The people, if there is such a thing as collective guilt, maybe in the sense that communities themselves become evil, and as communities, everyone participates in that evil. For example, if I could stop some evil, and I don't, it seemed to me like it's the same thing as me doing it, pretty close to it anyhow. So, the people that's actually involved will all be dead before very long and you can't, I don't think punish the ones that came afterward for the evils of their fathers and grandfathers and mothers and so forth. But they do need them to face what they did and I'm not too sure that they've ever done that, for example. Prime Minister Kohl for example, taking President Reagan just two or three years ago to Bitburg, for example. There still is a lot of insensitivity there on Prime Minister Kohl's part and on President Reagan's part. A lot of insensitivity there. I don't know whether before there's too much unification down there, there shouldn't be some facing up to what the Germans have really done. I thought this is unique as far as I know. I don't know of any unification history. There's been a lot of bloodshed and all of that, and terror and torture and there's nothing new about that, but the systematic attempt to wipe out a people completely from the face of the earth, I don't know whether anything like that on that scale has ever happened before. Do you? I kind of doubt it. It hadn't happened on that scale anyhow.

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier, before we started to tape this conversation, that when you returned to Germany in 1977, you saw them showing a film of Hitler?

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah.

Interviewer: And their reaction? You might mention that.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah, that was peculiar. I remember some British airmen were captured and there's a lot of glee in the audience because of that and there was an identification with some of the people who threw rocks at them at some of the people in the movie theater said. I had an older person sitting on my right, and a younger person sitting on my left, not right next to me but right close. And I remember their reactions were different. The older person who was old enough to participate in all of these at that time. I didn't react with shame, but the other one, the younger one did. The young one said something like, "Oh, my God." But you wouldn't hear this other older one, saying anything of that nature. The fact is that I suspect until they actually started losing the war, Hitler could have probably won any election that they had in Germany. So, he didn't do all this by himself. I mean he had a lot of collaborators, willing collaborators, too, with that. But in this film, I know this...it seemed like the education appeal is just a lot of opposition to showing this film. They didn't want to relive this. They wanted to forget it. And this, I think, is what this is far today, documented it. We, as a people, the world, doesn't forget this, it actually happened and then we need to remember that.

Interviewer: After you left the camp, did your unit move on to other areas of fighting or was it—

Rev Bill Harris: It was about over, we moved on to other areas. I remember we visited Julius Streicher. Was that the fellow down in Nuremberg, in Munich? His castle there and I remember seeing all the artwork in his palace. And also, with four or five friends of mine, we were kind of lucky in the way we got to go on a tour of Southeastern Europe. We went all over southern, Southeastern Germany and we went to Czechoslovakia, up as far as we can go on to Plzen. I remember several days in Plzen, Czechoslovakia. Because the war was over then and everybody was celebrating.

Interviewer: There was rest and relaxation.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah. I remember we're having a dance in Plzen and then playing a lot of Strauss' waltzes at that and then we came back into

Austria, Strasburg, and then Berchtesgaden. We stayed several days at Berchtesgaden and we visited a place they call Königssee which was kind of a lake. I remember a lot of Germans had gone to that area, movie stars, and very wealthy people and so on...

Interviewer: Did you go to Hitler's?

Rev Bill Harris: We went to Hitler's place.

Interviewer: Eagle's Nest?

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah. I didn't actually go up to his tea room. I don't know why, but I knew that his big window he had in his place, I looked out over and it had a beautiful setting there. I remember thinking at that time how a person could live surrounded by so much beauty and yet be so evil. In beauty it is I suppose is, geographically, one of the most beautiful areas in the entire world. I remember the barracks. There were SS guards and we stayed there. And there were fine barracks and fine beds for soldiers and beds and all of that. It was fine.

Interviewer: And all those guard stations on the way up, if you remember.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: If you go up that rode.

Rev Bill Harris: Yeah. And I remember, Hitler, I guess was a master at persuading people. He knew...