

Transcript:

Robert Ray Jr.

A19

21m40s

Interviewer 1: OK, well, like I said, I think I explained a little bit what the project's about and I read your pre-questionnaire and you talked about the fact that you guys, your unit marched through and came through to Nordhausen toward the end of the war. And if you could tell me a little bit about how you came about being in the army and what you did before the war?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, I was in the photographic business before the war. I worked for a company that finished, photo finishes big outfit here in Nashville. I got started off shooting a few pictures once in a while. And that's when the bug bit and that's all I want to do. I've got a [list on here (announcement?) 0:55] about Nordhausen if I could find that thing.

Interviewer 1: So, were you a photographer when you were in the army?

Robert Ray Jr: After the war was over, I didn't have enough points to come home and luckily, in my records, I had that I was capable of doing that kind of thing and I was called to division headquarters one day and made division photographer. So, if I had to stay over another year or so I was glad to get something I would enjoy doing. I was issued a jeep and a complete 4x5 speed graphic outfit, the whole works, travel all over Europe, Germany and Belgium, and Holland, France.

Interviewer 1: How old are you when you came in the army?

Robert Ray Jr: I think I was about 22. So, 1941, I was 21. I went in in '41, got out in '45.

Interviewer 1: What job did they give you initially? I see you were at the 32nd army infantry regiment.

Robert Ray Jr: That was 36th army infantry. That was over there. I went overseas as a replacement. I spent most of the time in the signal corps in this country doing radar work which was highly classified at that time. The Battle of the Bulge started over there and they needed a lot of infantry replacement so we got rushed off over there. And I was assigned to the 3rd army division, 36th army of the infantry regiment. And luckily, the war ended in about six weeks, I guess, after I got over there. But, that was enough of it. I didn't want no more of it.

Interviewer 1: What was the date – do you remember when you entered Nordhausen?

Robert Ray Jr: I got that down here somewhere but I can't put my finger on. Oh, here it is. "April 11th, 1945. The bombed out city of Nordhausen was the location of a concentration camp, the slave labor camp where hundreds of corpses lay everywhere side by side, some still living. When our tanks tore holes in the walls of the building, some of the poor devils were coming running out to meet us. We gave them some of the rations we had and they ate the cigarettes like candy. We had to push on but the infantry division that followed us gave the living medical attention and I don't know what happened to the dead. The men in my outfit were so mad now that there was no way we could lose the war," and that was all -- That's the only thing. I made this from my little pocket diary. And the next day, we learned that Pres. Roosevelt was dead, just didn't tie in with this. And that's really about all that I can add to this thing.

Interviewer 1: Do you remember the morning that you came into the camp?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, I don't remember whether it was morning or night but we thought it was just another town. This camp, probably made out of rock and brick or something so the tankers being noisy as they were – they just thought they'd just bust a hole through that wall. I guess all the German guards had heard this army division coming and they all left because I don't remember ever seeing one of them. So, we pushed a hole through that wall and these poor devils just come running out, those that were able to and they were just skeletons, just skin and bones.

Interviewer 1: What did you know about the camp when you first saw it? When you saw it, do you know what it was?

Robert Ray Jr: I did know nothing. I have no idea. Like I told someone, I never heard of the word holocaust until, gosh, years and years after the war was over. We thought they were just Russians and displaced persons, DPs, we call them. They were used, that there was a rocket factory in that little old town and we thought they were just used as slave laborers. And when we went on, we just forgot all about it, you know.

Interviewer: So your unit was driving by and you saw the wall compound. You decided to go ahead and the tankers decided to poke a hole on it, crash in and went to see what's inside.

Robert Ray Jr: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Then you opened it up and a lot of people came out.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how you felt when you saw it?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, it was kind of horrible. We weren't too well-fed ourselves because we didn't have too good of rations until... We usually just found rations in homes to eat. But there were these poor devils, they were starving to death and we gave them... Usually the tankers carried a lot of cigarettes and stuff inside their tanks and, us infantry guys, we rode on the back of the tanks. Even though it was long time ago, I can remember. I don't lay awake at night thinking about it but I can remember it. It's been old 50 years ago.

Interviewer 1: So you gave out the cigarettes to them and you said they ate the cigarettes.

Robert Ray Jr: They just ate them like candy. I don't know if they didn't know what they were. I just don't know. I don't remember.

Interviewer 1: How long did you stay in the camp overall?

Robert Ray Jr: Not long. An army division, they just keep on moving all the time. If you stop somewhere too long, you get hit by shells. But, as far as the holocaust was concerned, I don't remember ever even hearing anything about it until long time that the war was over. A lot of people don't think there was such a thing. At that time, if they would have told me that's what that was, I don't know whether I would have believed it or not. I would have thought those German civilians would have more sense than to let something like that take place. But the other camps, I'm sure were a lot worse than Nordhausen. I think it was one of the smallest ones.

Interviewer 1: How long after the war was it that you figured out or that you were told that that was a Jewish camp that...

Robert Ray Jr: I don't remember.

Interviewer 1: That was years afterwards? It wasn't —?

Robert Ray Jr: Yes. Well, my daughter works at the public library and she ran across that Nordhausen somewhere in the Internet and looked it up, found out that it was one of those atrocity camps. Well, then, I told her, "Shoot, I've been there. I was right there." And I just didn't connect it with anything like a holocaust but I'm sure there was one.

Interviewer 1: Where did you go after the camp? Where did your unit press on to?

Robert Ray Jr: I don't really remember. We were headed towards Berlin and I don't remember the next town. Our division commander, who incidentally was Jewish, Maurice Rose, made to general, was killed, one of the few high ranking general officers that was killed during World War II. He was killed between there and Paderborn. But I don't remember how far that was.

Interviewer 1: Did you have people that can speak to the prisoners, who are open? Did you have people who can interpret or...?

Robert Ray Jr: I just don't remember.

Interviewer 1: You're just one of people out there.

Robert Ray Jr: Like I said, we just consider them a bunch of DPs.

Interviewer 1: I see here you said that you give them what rations you had available to share with them and then, pressed on.

Robert Ray Jr: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer 1: Now, I noticed in here. I was reading that you had said that... when did you share this with your wife and your daughter and your family what happened?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, letters were centered during World War II. Nowadays, you can be on television in Iraq and your wife can be watching at home. But, we couldn't even write a letter home to tell anything. We just say hello and goodbye or something. So, I'm sure it was a long time after the war. They stop censorship, it was after the war was over. And of course, I didn't make too much out of this because I didn't think it was too much to it, not knowing that there was a holocaust, you see.

Interviewer 1: In your words here, you said, "I told my wife and daughter about my experience. I hope they believed me." What at that time made you feel like they might not have believed what you were telling them?

Robert Ray Jr: It's hard for an individual to believe that you saw something like that. I can't recall what I was seeing unless it was on public television and it pictures some of those little pictures land out. I don't remember ever seeing anything like that. It's just hard for people to believe even Hussein was supposed to have killed and murdered a lot of people but nothing of that scale.

Interviewer 1: And you got out of the military in what year?

Robert Ray Jr: In '45.

Interviewer 1: Forty-five.

Robert Ray Jr: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer 1: You moved back to Tennessee?

Robert Ray Jr: Yes.

Interviewer 1: Were you married before the war?

Robert Ray Jr: Yes, I was married before the war. And these boys that go over there now for a couple of months and their wives are screaming that they haven't seen their husbands in two months. My wife didn't see me for two and a half years.

Interviewer 1: So different times.

Robert Ray Jr: Different time.

Interviewer 1: And you went into the news business, the news photography as you say.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes, mm-hmm.

Interviewer 1: Thirty years?

Robert Ray Jr: I worked for the old Nashville Banner. I had a good time.

Interviewer 1: That's wonderful. Do you think much about the war now?

Robert Ray Jr: No, I don't think too much about it. I know I would have had to going over there if it hadn't been for the Battle of the Bulge. My wife and I were in Florida. I mean Southeast Florida, way all down close to Miami and we were just having a ball. And I won't forget the day when I called, I come in and I told her, I said, I've been transferred to the infantry, we got to go home. And she [left her dad 13:08]. But we were young and you can take a lot when you are young.

Interviewer 1: Very true. Have you spoke to other groups about your experiences in the camp?

Robert Ray Jr: No.

Interviewer 1: Or with the camp?

Robert Ray Jr: Um-um. Yes. This is really the first time it's been brought up. I made this little record here of what little I did during the war, just to give to my daughter, and I kept a copy of it for myself.

Interviewer 1: Is there anything you'd like to add that I haven't brought up?

Robert Ray Jr: You about covered it. You made it -- You got more out of me than I thought you would.

Interviewer 2: When you think about that day, especially the liberation of the camp itself, what do you think you remember the most?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, I don't know. It was just -- we were in such a hurry. We didn't really spend too much time there as I remember and just going up to see what was going on which was long enough. It was just a horrible sight.

Interviewer 2: What do you say to people who said it didn't happen?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, I don't know. There's a lot of people in this country that don't believe that ever happen but I don't see hardly how they can say that with all these -- there's

too much proof once you really have some living survivors of the thing. Have you interviewed those out here? You have?

Interviewer 2: Yes, we do. And do you know every one of them who said, their greatest day of joy was the day when you guys got there?

Robert Ray Jr: I'm sure it was.

Interviewer 2: One of the cause of his second birthday because...

Robert Ray Jr: I'm sure. I know how it would have felt probably, if I had been in there.

Interviewer 2: How do you feel about that when they looked at you, if they...?.

Robert Ray Jr: I just did -- just the war was going on and it was just something that happened. It was just another day in your diary, you might say.

Interviewer 2: They looked at you almost 60 years later as the greatest moment of their life when you came in.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes.

Interviewer 2: And 60 years later, they still remember that. How does that make you feel?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, it makes me feel pretty good.

Interviewer 2: For you, as a member of the [unintelligible 0:15:32.4].

Robert Ray Jr: Yes. Well, I'm sure it was another day in their life, the ones that were still living. Which was the biggest, the Ostrowiec?

Interviewer 2: Ostrowiec and Dachau were the basic ones.

Robert Ray Jr: Dachau.

Interviewer 2: Dachau was liberated by the Americans. Ostrowiec was liberated by the Soviets.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes, I guess Dachau was liberated by, was it George Patton?

Interviewer 2: Yes, [unintelligible 0:16:03.6] involved.

Robert Ray Jr: And he called the higher officers in there to look at it and the news media, because he knew nobody would believe him, probably.

Interviewer 2: In Dachau, they allowed some of the healthier inmates to kill the guards as a – for retribution.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes.

Interviewer 2: Did you remember seeing...?

Robert Ray Jr: I remember seeing – no, I saw a picture one time where it showed all the German officers that were guards at this place, they lined them up at against the wall outside. They shot every one of them. So, I don't know if that was at Dachau or Ostrowiec.

Interviewer 2: Dachau, they allowed the inmates to do it.

Robert Ray Jr: But I don't remember seeing a German at ...

Interviewer 2: In Nordhausen.

Robert Ray Jr: Because I'm sure we would have fought it out with them because the war was still going on. It was a terrible experience and I wouldn't take a million dollars for it.

Interviewer 2: What do you want people to remember most of?

Robert Ray Jr: Well, I just think that there will be another war fought like World War II and of course, people thought about World War I the same way. It's such a high-tech war now. There's no such thing as single action bolt action rifle, M1 [grenade 17:34]. They don't even have tommy guns anymore. I don't think they do. They got those AK, what?

Interviewer 1: M16s?

Robert Ray Jr: M16s. Bazookas, we used to have a bazooka. That thing would knock out a tank with just a shot from your shoulder but it's all high-tech. It was, like I said, a wonderful experience but I wouldn't want to go through it again but I wouldn't take a million dollars for it. Although, I contributed very little because if it hadn't been for the Battle of the Bulge, I know I wouldn't have gone over.

Interviewer 1: Still very important.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes. And seeing that Battle of the Bulge on television, if the Germans hadn't run out of gasoline, we might not have won that war. I mean, they had a brigade of tiger tanks and they crushed everything they come to.

Interviewer 1: Bob, do you have anything?

Interviewer 3: Two things. Did you have a camera with you?

Robert Ray Jr: No.

Interviewer 3: Or any of the...

Robert Ray Jr: We went to some of the cities in Germany where the best photographic equipment in the world were made. And of course, at that time, most of them were making binoculars and bomb sites. But there were high ranking German officers you come across. [He's had, like around his neck, contacts.] [Unintelligible 0:19:13.9] cameras. For some reason or another, I never did get a hold to one and everybody got a hold of him before I did but that was before the Japanese cameras kind of took over.

Interviewer 3: In your career as photo journalist, do you ever have to photograph grizzly scenes?

Robert Ray Jr: Everything you can think of. Everything you can possibly think of. We shot pictures of it and if it was too bad... because the paper wouldn't publish them if it was too horrible. But usually, you just do it for the record anyway so you'd have something to brag about the next day.

Interviewer 3: There were a lot of photographs taken in the camps and I don't know if they were by Americans or Germans and sometimes they even traded these photographs. They're very popular. I had them.

Robert Ray Jr: I just imagine that the rear echelon troops that come in there after we moved on out... I just imagine they made a lot of pictures of that stuff.

Interviewer 3: The generals made photographs.

Robert Ray Jr: Yes. I'm sure they made photographs, made them two little things there. I'm not positive but somebody...

Interviewer 3: How did you get these?

Robert Ray Jr: I just found them.

Interviewer 3: You just found them.

Robert Ray Jr: Tanks back then couldn't move at night. They have no way of seeing. And at night, we'd just stop in any place and go in a house, spend the night or just sleep out on the grounds somewhere but we were in a house when I found those little things which don't show you much. And then, they're 50 years old. They've turned color a little since I found them.

Interviewer 1: Rob, thank you so much. Thank you for taking your time.

Robert Ray Jr: Well, I got to go. My wife is going to [spend?] me to death if I don't hurry up.