

**NAME: MATTHEW NESBITT
INTERVIEWED BY: RUTH SCHEINBERG
CAMP: BERGEN -BELSEN
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My name is Matthew Nesbitt, I live at 1520 Farnell Court, Apt. 1832, Decatur, Ga.30033. My date of birth is 9/20/1913, and I believe at the time of the liberation of Belsen, I was approximately 32 years of age. My profession at the beginning of the Second World War was a professional baseball player. Present occupation: I am involved in Public Relations. Military unit I served with was the Royal Canadian Air Force. At the time of the liberation, my rank was Sergeant, and the camp we liberated was Bergen-Belsen.

R.Scheinberg. Thank you very much, now we will get on with our description of ... as you enter Bergen Belsen , do you remember when you first heard of a concentration camp? Was there talk in the unit?

A: No, and none of us were aware of anything such as a concentration camps. We had never heard anything.

Q: And you, as a Jewish man, had never heard, either?

A: No.

Q: Then you did not know what to expect? Did you have any idea of the atrocities? You had no idea of the atrocities you might encounter?

A: The only information I had was from the Padre, who informed us there was such a thing as a concentration camp at Belsen, the night before we left. That was the first time we heard of it.

Q: As an American soldier, did you have any personal feelings? Or as a Jew? You were Canadian ? at the time? I see Or, as a Jewish man, did you possibly have any particular feeling, hatred toward you what you right encounter? At camps? Because of Hitler?

A: No, not at that particular time. I couldn't believe what I saw, but I think the important thing at that time was not to weigh your personal feeling, but to save as many people as possible.

Q: And your date of arrival, again, at camp, was approximately?

A: My date of arrival, as I think back, I believe was in the early part of winter 1945. Rather than in the spring. Now I'm not too sure on this, the date, naturally .

Q: When you actually entered the camp, were you the first man, the first group of men to open the gate actually? Do you think that your unit was the first one to come into the camp?

A: Well, number one, our unit was... we were volunteers. How we became aware of Bergen-Belsen could be of interest. The night prior to our going to Bergen-Belsen, there was a Jewish Padre, who came into our unit, and he was crying so much and emotionally upset that our commanding officer couldn't make head or tail of it. So the Padre being Jewish, the c.o. called me and said he wanted me to try to find out what he was talking about. We calmed him down a little bit, and then he continued to say that there was such a place a Bergen-Belsen, about 20 mile away from us, and they are in need of food and medical supplies, and could we help them? At that particular time, the military was moving in such a manner that the c.o. had to ask for volunteers, rather than tell certain group to go. So, he asked me if I would command the unit of volunteer. So I picked up about 14 volunteers, who included doctors or somebody who was familiar with medicine who could help save lives, and we started out very early the next morning with a truckload of food, medical supplies and went right down to Belsen. Well, when we got down to Belsen, there were 800 as I believe, SS and Hungarian guards (both men and women still in the camp).

Q: These men were still guarding the camp? Or, they were in the camp? Or what are you saying? I don't understand.

A: They were still in the camp, but apparently there had been a small allied force that had preceded us, I think, the day before, and

Q: Had probably actually opened the gates?... but they remained there, they did not leave?

A: Because... the camp was just as it always was Nothing had changed.

Q: Did you take these people prisoners, or did you... did they just remain there?

A: We didn't have to take them prisoners. I spoke to the commanding officer and he said that he was willing to comply ... and I can understand why... the more lives we saved the better it would be for him. But all their arms had been stacked that morning... they had surrendered that morning, just prior to our getting there I believe. Their camp was still in operation, and the guard were still there.

Q: I'll stop for just one minute...

Matt, as you entered the camp, do you remember the actual description of the camp how it looked to you? Or smells, or any sound? As there anything...?

A: Oh yes. I remember, but there is one thing I must point out to you. And that is the first thing we had to do when we got to camp. Prior to even distributing the food And that was to make sure we used the guards to separate the living from the dead, from the huts, because first of all, if we are going to save anybody, we had to know who was alive and who had to be buried. So, we made arrangements with the commanding officer for us

to use all of the guards to find out who was alive and who was dead. The only way you could do that was to go into each individual hut and shake whoever was on that little slab ... If they didn't move, they were dead. If there was any movement, we pulled them out and put them into a different section of the hut. The dead were then We instructed the guards to take the dead and pile them up outside in the so-called streets, at which time there were other guards who went by with trucks and I have pictures that I took myself showing the guard taking the bodies from the pile and putting them into the truck, at which time there were so many bodies that we had to have a mass grave. To dig a big hole and bulldoze it when they were available and cover it up, and put lime on it. And that we intended to have the German guards do, both men and women. So, when I first saw the camp, the stench was beyond description, the camp itself was beyond description. The people were walking around without any idea where they were going, they were absolutely in a daze; one little girl came up to me and without any emotion whatsoever ... she said, "my mother just died." and turned around and walked away just as if death was an everyday occurrence, and of course it was. But the condition there, ... it is awfully difficult to describe it, because I don't think.... Actually a picture can describe it, but word probably couldn't do it justice.

Q: Where there any prisoners there who were alert enough to realize that you were actually liberators? Were there some who realized this?

A: Yes, some. The... the next thing we had to do was to find out who among the inmates was able to help, who were coherent, and who could take a leadership role with the inmates, and they could help themselves too. So there were some, but not very very many. A very small percentage.

Q: Did your commanding officer or anyone give you any instructions - as the man in charge there - any specific thing on how to handle the prisoners, the inmates, I mean since.... I mean possibly with food? How did you handle giving of the food to the people? I understand this was...

A: Oh yes, it was terrible.... we baked practically a truckload of bread the night before, and then the way we got the food for the inmates was voluntary contributions from the men who had received parcels from overseas, because we, ourselves, in our camp, were moving so fast that we didn't have adequate food. So they very kindly consented to contribute all of the extra things they had. And the smell of the bread caused an almost mall riot when we drove into the camp, but rather than use the guards to control the people, we used the inmates who were coherent to control the people. Because, you could see that the inmates who were coherent, the first thing they wanted to do - after they had eaten - was to get revenge, and we didn't want a blood-bath in that camp at that particular time. So this took a little bit of diplomacy, and persuasion.

Q: Matt, did you have any difficulty when you saw these people in this tattered and absolutely terrible condition, to relate to them, as people? You know some people have feelings of not being part of the picture, somehow. We have had people who have felt no real feeling toward them? Did you personally? And how did you feel?

A: My men were extremely compassionate, and we had discussed immediately upon entering the camp, that this is no time to show emotion, the job was to find the living and to save and bury the dead, and feed the people who could eat. So whatever emotion we had, we tried to hide very much. Our job was to just save the living. But, as far as my commanding officer was concerned, I had no instructions. And there were no instructions he could give me, because he had never been there, and he didn't know what the situation was. So, we did what we thought had to do, and we did it on our own, and apparently it was the right thing to do.

Q: You men did not encounter any problem when you gave the people the bread? We have heard that some people ate so hungrily... that death occurred. Did you have any such problem.

A: Yes,.... well, we knew that we should not give them too much at one time. So, again, the coherent inmates came into play at that particular time. We put the responsibility of the welfare of the other inmates, somewhat upon their shoulders too. And we told them, we are here to save them, not to kill them. So, let us just give what we think they ought to have, and then we had a couple of nurses and a couple of doctors who offered help, but of course, it wasn't enough.

Q: Did you go around the whole camp? The camp of Bergen-Belsen? I don't know the size of it... but

A: Very big.

Q :And what did you find besides the areas where they lived? I mean did you find the ovens, the places of killing? Can you describe to some extent what you did find?

A: Well, the ovens were still hot when we got there, and I believe, I am not too sure of course, but I believe that some of the ovens, and on the conveyances that they used to put the people in the oven, there were still some bodies on one or two of them, which of course, we had seen so many bodies when we came there, that it was just another body. But, the living quarters for them was just beyond belief. They just had enough room to lie flat, they couldn't even turn around during the night, if they had to or wanted to in their sleep. Just enough room to lie there and nothing else. And... the conditions we found there for example, the sanitary conditions were just... well, there just weren't any. Some of the people had lost completely

and I went into one of the huts or barracks as they called it, and here is a man and a woman urinating and defecating in the corner, and everybody is

talking and they pay no attention. Their self respect had been stripped. And they were just walking around in a state of shock, and had no feeling, and no concern, just waiting to die.

Q: But the Germans that you found, did you find any of the German guards... I know you said the Yugoslavs or the others, oh the Hungarians, but you did not find any Germans..... German guards? They had already fled?

A: No, no. The German guards were till there too.

Q: There were some German guards?

A: Of the 800 guards, some were German, men and women, and some were Hungarian men and women, of which I....

Q: Yes, you did say that, I had forgotten about that. So, it seems to me you must have had a terrific of job of restraining the people from doing anything to these guards? You did not have any problem?

A: We didn't, because I think we did it very very intelligently. We did a very intelligent thing to start with the lack of experience we had in that type of warfare. We enlisted the aid of the coherent inmates, that was the first thing we figured we should do. If we didn't there was no control, there was no way only 14 people (and that's all we had) there's no way that 14 people can handle 800 guards plus the officers, plus the inmates, we solicited the cooperation of the coherent inmates and placed a lot of the responsibility on them, and they reacted very very admirably. I mean...

Q: Yes, really seems like it was handled well.

Among these guards, there were SS men, do you remember having any bad feelings particularly toward them? Did you treat them any differently?

A: No, we did not bother too much with the guards at all. We just told them that there are certain things that they have to do, and we think it is to their advantage to do it, and the commanding officer convinced them of the same thing.

Q: So you really seemed to have handled that in an usually good manner.

A: Well, we knew what we had...

Q: I think you did.

A: We knew what we had to do and went ahead and did it, because we were there 96 hours. And during that 96 hours, I don't think any of my people slept or stopped to eat too much. We just didn't have the time, we just wanted to clean it up as soon as we could.

Q: Did you find any German civilians at all in that area, or did they come from the nearby city? What was the nearby city, if there was one?

A: I think there was a city about 20 miles away, and I believe it was called Bergen. I am not sure.

Q: Well, we can check on that. Did any German civilians come to the camp? For any reason?

A: Not while I was there. In fact, when we left the camp and were going back to our airport, our station, we stopped in Bergen-Belsen, and I found the Burgomeister, and I asked him if he was aware of the fact that there was a concentration camp with the killings that went on. He said - nobody knew that the camp existed, and it was hard to believe him, because you could smell the camp right in that town itself. There was no way, they could not know.

Q: Then you actually buried all the people you found... dead, did you?

A: There was no way we could finish. The Allied forces who came up, I believe it was, 96 hours later, and the troops finished it, because there are a couple of numbers that are fixed in my mind, and I believe there were 60,000 inmates originally in that camp, or more, and I believe when we reached there, it was less than half of that population that could be saved. So there was a lot of burying to be done.

Q: Now I would like to talk a little bit about how the men with you coped, or discussed this experience afterwards. Was there conversation afterwards? Do you feel it had a great deal of impact on any of the them? Say, the 12 men or 14 men who went with you?

A: Oh well, it certainly did have an impact. Number one, they were reluctant to discuss it, because they felt that even though they had been there, and did what they did, which was great, they didn't know how anybody would believe the conditions they would describe. Because it was beyond a human comprehension without actually photographic evidence. So, of course they were touched, and we all got a leave after that. We went away. They flew us up to England, I believe, for 7 days, and yes, it made an impression on them. No doubt of it.

Q: Do you remember if there was anybody who might have a stronger reaction? Such as unable to cope with this at all?

A: I wouldn't say unable to cope with it, but we had to watch our men pretty closely too, because of the emotion that could be cultivated there, and there was one instance where my right hand man almost went out of control when he had detailed some of the German guards, or Hungarian guards, to pick the bodies up and put them in the truck. He was smoking a cigarette, and I remember this very vividly, and one of the guards, the German guards on the truck, saw him flick his cigarette butt away, and wanted to get off the truck and pick up the butt. The last thing my man wanted to give these people was anything at all. And when he saw that, he made a move toward his pistol, and I was there, and I said, just hold it, let's

don't start anything. We've got a job to do, and that's the only instance I had with my people where they might have gotten out of control.

Q: Among these 14 men, there was not a man of the ... a chaplain, was there?

A: No. Yes, I believe the chaplain who told us about this condition, came back with us the following morning, at the same time we did. He stayed with us overnight and he came back with us the following morning, so he was one of the 14.

Q: But of the people you found, would you say that most of them were Jewish? Or were there other nationalities? Or gypies? Or ... Russians, Polish?

A: I would say, to the best of my knowledge, I don't think there were any Russians or Polish people there. There were... the majority were Jews, but there were many many people who were not Jewish, who were intellectuals, professionals, doctors, lawyers, very intelligent people.

Q: Political dissenters?

A: Yes, political dissenters, or just people who had done well, who the Nazis objected to for no apparent reason and put them in the concentration camps. Because in my discussion with some of these people, the Nazis really didn't have to have a reason to put them in the concentration camps. If you had something they wanted, they took it and sent you away.

Q: Sure. That's just about how it did work.

A: Yes, the concentration camps were not populated only by Jews.

Q: Yes, that is a proven fact. But did the chaplain use his offices in any way in the burying of the dead or in giving comfort - or he did actually help in the distribution of the food and medicine?

A: Well, he really went around and just became one of the group to help us separate the living from the dead. And to go ahead and do what he normally would have to do during his work, we could have lot some people while he was doing that.

Q: Yes, very good. During this time, and maybe during your Rest and Recreation period when you went to England after this, did you write home to anyone about this situation that you saw? To some extent?

A: No, when we got to England, we were told, in fact, I was told to advise my people that this is not the time to write letters home and discuss these things. They would appreciate very much if we just said nothing about it, and to just let it drop, and they would take care of the publishing of it.

Q: But then later years when you did come home, did you discuss with anyone? I don't know whether you were married or not at the time, possibly with your wife or mother or sister..? Intimate friends?

A: No, not really.

Q: Not really until these year?

A: Not really.

Q: And over the years, not with any veterans organizations or anyone?

A: No.

Q: And this is your first experience of really talking at any length?

A: Except during some meetings when people would talk about it, and I would bring it up, like at the Center, when they talked about the inmates, I just ...

Q: But you have never been interviewed or shown your pictures like unofficially?

A: No, I wasn't anxious to do that... until I was sure that people were making an effort to make people aware of the Holocaust. Because I can't do anything myself, but I am willing to help if there is a movement.

Q: Right. So when you and your friend saw this write-up about Emory University making this Witness to the Holocaust program, you decided to come in... is that correct?

A: Yes, I called up, and they sent me a letter, and this is the result.

Q: Are you married? Or were you married at the time... ?

A: Of when?

Q: Of the liberation.

A: Yes, I was married at the time.

Q: And when you returned home, did you tell your wife of this at all?|

A: No.

Q: Do you have children?

A: No.

Q: No children. Did you happen to see this Holocaust TV show about two or three years ago? Do you feel it was a fair picture or not? What was your reaction when you saw some of it, part of it?

A: I really didn't feel that it portrayed the true story really. It was dramatized, and I think primarily they were interested in making a good movie out of it, rather than telling the truth.

Q: Thank you. Do you think that our idea of recording this information has value? Do you think that what we are doing, not only us, but possibly other people, at this time, 35 years later, has value... and why? What do you think?

What would your suggestion be? That we could use....?

A: Yes, I think, that although we started late, the old cliché comes into effect, better late than never. I feel that we have a moral responsibility to ---- a lot of these people, to show them that these things have happened before, and they can happen again. And you have them right here - up in Marietta (Ga), this Stoner. How he gets on TV, and says what he does about other people, and yet he is talking to the people who went overseas and were willing to get killed and maimed to ... fight against people like Stoner. How he gets away with it, I'll never know. I know that it's been a topic of conversation among veterans who have been inside concentration camps, and this is how these things start through a little "Stoner" and people think that he cannot ferment trouble, but Hitler was nothing but a paperhanger, and look what happened. The stories about better-educated people than him, so I think that people should squelch these things in the bud, they have no right to do this in my estimation.

Q: There is a decided effort in the schools now to educate the children to know what their parents went through in this generation, not only the German people, but the American people.

A: That's right.

Q: And do you think this has value?

A: Oh, absolutely. I think the only way is through education. I mean... man's inhumanity to man is inconceivable... people can't understand it, but it is possible, and that's where you have a difference.

Q: And it happens not only to Jewish-people, but you mention that in the camp, you found other people who disagreed, or as you say "were rich" and they took whatever they wanted from them.

A: This is what a lot of people don't understand, Ruth. It wasn't primarily Jewish people, basically, I would say it would have... it was possibly 60% Jewish people and 40% Christian people. And yet people will not believe or will not try to understand that Nazism was against all of the intellectual people including Jewish people. They killed the cream of society of the gentile people, of the Christian people

Q: ...personal question... in continuation of your thoughts after the liberation of the camp. Did you personally encounter any problems with yourself? Nightmares or eventually have to see a counselor for help?

A: No, I did not..

Q: Very good. I want to discuss any part that religion might have played in this. At the time of liberation, did you consider yourself a religious man?

A: Not really. No. I just.... uh ... observed the holidays.... I am not anti-religious but I am not real Orthodox.

Q: But when you saw these horrible situations, did a connection or thought come into your mind... how God could let such a thing happen? Or, did you feel resentful that it was happening... ?

A: I felt resentful that it was happening, but

Q: But not as a religious person?

A: No. Not as a religious person, no.

Q: And this was the way you viewed the prisoners, not the prisoners, I mean the inmates the SS men... you looked upon them as a human being, rather than from a religious point of view? Never bothered you then?

A: No.

Q: Okay, but ... I guess the civilians the same thing... ?

But, Matt, did you ever think of yourself, had you been on the other side of the fence, if you had been one of these prisoners or these inmates, how you would have kept your faith., how you would have survived, would religion have entered into it? Do you think, or maybe just your sheer ability or desire to live? What did you think? Did you think in those terms at all?

A: No, I really didn't, because you know, during the war, there's many times you want to feel that religion has something to do with your getting hurt or escaping getting hurt, you have the opportunity to do that.... No, I am more or less a fatalist, I believe if it's going to happen, it is going to happen. And there's nothing you can do to top it. So, religion didn't help me.

Q: Did you, later, then have any thoughts about giving the Nazis.... did you feel that you understood how things came about with them?

A: I didn't forgive them. Because this situation could have been prevented, and as said before when they have the same situation here, although everybody thinks that it is impossible , but they thought the same thing in Germany. They thought it was impossible. In other words, it can't happen to us... it can only happen to "them." This is a bad attitude to have. I believe that people in Germany, more or less, brought it upon themselves; sure I feel sorry for them and hope it never happens again, but I believe the people themselves can prevent these things from happening if they have the courage to do so and will speak out and nip it in the bud before it gets a good hold on the nation. Any nation, whatever it may be.

Q: Do you plan to go back to visit this area when you go to Europe the next time?

A: Yes, I would go back. I would go back, because Germany is still a beautiful country, and not everybody I met there was a Nazi.... some people had been involved and took very little part in the Nazi movement, so there are some people that I remember who were a disgrace to the Nazi party more or less, but a credit to the human race. But very few.

Q: But they were there?

A: And they were there...

Q: And you did see some?

A: Yes

Q: From a political point of view, having undergone not only World War II experience, but this horrible experience on top of it, do you.... did it change any of your political views, or influence you as you came home? You were still an active young man then and went into a different field of endeavor, I see, public relations.

A: Well, what sort of view are you... ?

Q: Well, did you feel that you ought to take a stronger part in the government to see that such things would not occur(referring to the machine: I think it is all right, maybe I had better try it)I was anxious to know if you became active in the political scene in any way?

A: No, I didn't become active in the political situation.

Q: Nor did you take any part in the civil rights movement that came up... did you feel that this had any bearing - or direct relationship on the experience you had?

A: I believe in the civil rights, but I didn't take any part in it.

Q: And now that we have gone through a Vietnam War, and there are problems in the Middle East, and we hear of executions and fighting and the life in Cambodia and in the Near East and we know that many of the things that you witnessed are still happening in these areas, have you any ideas what we can do to combat this in way? Or, what we as Americans should be doing? That's kind of a loaded question, and I don't mean to put you on the spot...

A: I know that, yes. ...

Q: We are just really trying to learn and help ourselves, and if we glean the least bit of information from anybody, maybe it will help us out.

A: I believe we have to start to clean up our own backyard first. I am sorry to say that there may be some honest men in the political scene, I haven't set them yet, but I imagine there must be.... I believe that if we can clean up the political scene and put some honest people in government, whoever they may be or from whatever party they are from, that this is the step in

the right direction, and we have it to help ourselves and then help others. We can it go all over the world helping these unfortunate people when our country is falling apart. We've got to do something for ourselves. For example, President Carter and the presidents before him, say they want to cut the budget. Well, that's fine, but cutting the budget at somebody else's expense... ?If they would just cut out some of the overhead that they have, the people that they don't need, that they patronize, the paperwork, they could balance the budget just in Washington by only using the people they need. They have more people to do one man's job than is necessary, so that is where the economy should start. That would save energy, balance the budget and we would be in good shape, but we need honest policies.

Q: Well, it seems we have to start somewhere, because education is probably the beginning. There is a question I want to ask you.... do you feel a need to do something today to make sure that this doesn't happen again? Do you personally feel that need... through politics, education or religion, or in your occupation or maybe even in your personal contacts? Should we, as a generation of people, who have undergone WW 11 and particularly the Holocaust which you have viewed, do we have an obligation to the world or to ourselves even?

A: Yes, we do. We certainly do. I believe we have an obligation to ourselves, we have an obligation to our fellow human beings, and again this goes back to education. I believe that if we have enough people to ---- through this thing and say what they saw, they can go out and talk to the people ... this would make a big difference in the years to come. That's the way we put the veteran. We could stop these people from saying "it can't happen here." They said that in Germany and it did happen, and there is no way to save the people... like Stoner... and start some trouble here... we'll be in a lot of trouble before we head it off.

Q: Well, I really think we have covered a great deal of territory. I think you made extremely explicit and very helpful information. These notes will go into the archives of Emory University and Mr. Nesbitt has kindly brought us some very fine photograph taken by - I guess they were official photographers, were they not? Some were and some were not. These are scenes at Bergen-Belsen, which we will make photocopies of, and some of his personal photographs which are explicit also. I thank you very much for coming. I think you have been extremely helpful. Thank you.