

Leo D. Hymas

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Question: Ok. We're back in business. Now let me go back to Europe here just for a second. And you were talking about what you wore.. and we heard a lot of people talk about what they wore and what it was like sleeping in the cold and the snow, but you talked about, explained about the spoon in the boot and the toilet paper in the helmet. Why the...

Answer: Well, a helmet's a really good thing. It protects your head from bullets and falling debris. You can dig a foxhole with it. You can wash your clothes in it. It works like a latrine. You need toilet paper. You always carried that. The spoon in my boot was so that I could eat the things I found along the way, or sometimes they would say to us. Here's a K-ration. Share it between two of you. The soup kitchen will be up tomorrow afternoon. We never saw them for 5 days. I got so hungry. In a cellar that we were fighting our way through, I found a small bottle of white cherries and crust of black bread. I was so hungry. I cut the mold off the bread and wolfed it down and I ate all those cherries. Can you imagine what that did? Stomachache, diarrhea. It's awful hard to fight a war when those things are happening to you.

Question: Did you... when you were moving through Europe after crossing the Rhine, were you always out front? Were you in advance...

Answer: We were always on the front line. In fact, with Patton you were always ahead of the front line. He was a tough, tough General, but I admired him, I honored him, and we followed the orders that our company was given. I recall that one time in Europe in Eastern Germany we got so far ahead they asked us to hold it, and so we were stopped at a farmhouse compound and there was a large mobile artillery piece that was by the side of the barn. The barn and the house and the chicken coup and the storage sheds were all in kind of a compound so that the heat of the animals could keep the family warm. There was a German farmer and his wife, and they had a slave laborer, a woman named, she was from Poland, she was Polish, and I think her name was Tonya. Anyway, we set up our machine gun, camouflaged it, and two of us had to sit by the machine gun and look ahead toward the front every minute, so we took turns. Two hours on and four hours off, and we took what food we could get and occasionally there'd be a Jeep bring us some cartridges, and we were to keep quiet, keep low, and not do anything. And we did that, I think we were there about 10 days. I recall one day hearing a terrible noise. I thought it was an awful noise, and in was in the upper level of the barn, and I climbed up the ladder to see what was going on, and the farmer was up there. He was a big, fat guy. He was sitting in a chair, and the had a big hopper with a great wheel on it with a handle, and this slave labor girl was being forced to turn the handle while they ground some kind of grain to make chicken feed out of. I'm a farmer, I knew what they were doing. And every time she bent over, he had a pitchfork. He would whack her with the handle of the pitchfork on her back to make her keep going, and she was crying but she was doing it. That made me very angry. I made him turn the wheel, and every time he bent over I pricked him with the pitchfork a little bit to make him go. Well, she loved it. She became my friend and she was afraid of him after that for what happened. And she asked if she could sleep in the area that we were so we could protect her. So we gave her a corner, and she slept on some blankets that she had. We were in the other corner. Now to fraternize with a civilian was a.. could be a fine of \$65. That's more than 3 months' pay. I never fraternized with any of the civilians, but I thought well, she's Polish, and I did befriend her a little bit. One day she came with something in her apron she wanted to give me. Fresh eggs. I hadn't eaten fresh eggs for months. Oh, that tasted good. But the orders came soon that we were to move ahead, and we did, so I don't know what happened to her.

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Question: Did, um, did, what was your view of the Germans at that time. Did you have hatred or did you identify each individual as an enemy, or were you fighting a country, or what were you....?

Answer: Well, I had two feelings. The first one was, there's an enemy. What is it? Just a big mass. Then when my friend was killed, it's a wicked fearful fighting mass of people. Then when we captured a couple, gosh, these are kids like me. Those two that were shot, one was younger than me. He was even crying, but then after Buchenwald, I hated them. I didn't care if they suffered. I wanted them to. I wanted them to share the horrors that they perpetrated on these helpless people.

Question: So the people that you went into the town and brought back to Buchenwald, the German citizens, your attitude...

Answer: We prodded them. I never, I never killed defenseless people. Some of our men did that because they were German, and sometimes it was a mistake, you didn't know. But I always followed the rule. I can remember General Patton said, Your role in this war is not to die like some poor bastard. It's to make the other poor bastard die. And I worked at being a good soldier.

Question: Did the, when they brought the Germans back to the camp, were, now what town was this?

Answer: The town is Weimar.

Question: And that was right at Buchenwald

Answer: Weimar was noted historically, I didn't know it then, but I know it now because of its cultural heritage. And this is just the opposite, the far reaches of wickedness.

Question: What were the civilians' reactions when you marched them into Buchenwald?

Answer: Mir nicht Nazi! We didn't do it!

Question: So they knew....

Answer: We didn't know. Goodness, you could smell the death in the town, in the valley, all over.

Question: Do you have a, do you dream about it still?

Answer: When I first came home I had horrible nightmares. About 6 or 7 years ago, the holocaust center asked if I would tell my story, and I said, I can't do that, and they coaxed, and I said, Well, I'll try, and I've done that now for the last 7 years, many times. It became a healing process for me to talk about it, because I never could. When the war was over, my parents wanted me to, Let's get on with life. Let's not think about those terrible things. How could you not? They're branded in my brain.

Question: So when you first got there and you lost your friend Jimmy, and the things you must have seen terrible, inhuman things even before Buchenwald?

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Answer: Oh, yes, yeah. I saw the things that happen in war as we fought each other, and as my friends and fellow soldiers died and were wounded and were tended by the medics and helped in tight places, that was nothing like the imprisonment, the torture, the starvation, the mistreatment, and the cruelty that was done to the people. I can still see in my mind's eye that SS officer with that naked rotting body over his shoulder and his handkerchief to his nose as he carried him to dump him into this huge big pit. SS officer, I made him do it. I have seen the warehouse where all the personal effects were stacked. The purses, the glasses, the crutches, the rings, the coats, the underwear, the shoes, the socks. Thousands of people's personal belongings. I didn't know it then, but I know it now, there were more than 18,000 prisoners in that camp. I didn't know it then, but I know now that they brought prisoners of war from the Russian front to be executed at Buchenwald, and they did it in a very weird way. They took two at a time in a van to a stable that had been converted to look like a doctor's clinic office. They told the prisoners to take off their clothes, go stand on the scale. They were to be given a physical. Behind the wall with a little slot in the wall two SS officers shot them in the neck, and their bodies were dragged over and dumped down a coal shoot to a basement room, and there were hooks on the room that are still there. If the body was not yet dead, he was hung on the hook to be strangled with wire by SS officers, and then they were placed on a lift like a elevator and pushed up to the crematorium for the bodies to be burned. When I was there in 1945, the crematorium couldn't take care of the countless bodies. They did away with 9,000 Russian prisoners of war in Buchenwald in that strange manner.

Question: Did that first night after you breached the wire, did you sleep?

Answer: No. No. I stood guard. I tried to talk to some of the prisoners. None of them, we couldn't understand each other. We couldn't let them wander away. Most of them could hardly walk. We made them stay in the tent, I mean in the camp. We tried to bring things to them. I tried to share my food with them. It made them sick. They couldn't eat it. I don't think I slept those 4 - 5 days at all. Just snatches here and there.

Question: What was the feeling you had? Were you sick to your stomach or were you...

Answer: I didn't throw up. I didn't get seasick, and I didn't throw up at Buchenwald, but I had a hard time eating anything.

Question: Do you remember the smell?

Answer: I've never smelled it before and I never have since, but I'll tell you what I thought it smelled like. I lived on a farm, and sometimes our cattle would die, and there was a processing plant that would pick up dead cattle, dead horses, dead dogs, whatever, and they processed them into what they called fox food, and it was sold to those who raised foxes or mink for fur, and I'd gone with my father on occasion to that place, and the smell emanating from that processing plant was, I thought, similar to the smell of the burning flesh in the crematoriums, and the smell of filth, rotting bodies, the fluids, and the ...

Question: Had you known before you got to Buchenwald had you heard rumors about concentration...

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Answer: We knew absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing. We thought it was a prisoner of war camp. We hoped there would be friends of ours in there. Speaking of a prisoner of war camp, I was sent on a mission with a jeep driver back to rear echelon, and on the way on the autobahn, we were back behind lines, there was a soldier sitting on a bag. He was in a English uniform, and we stopped, and he had been a prisoner of war of the Germans for 4 ½ years and he had been freed and he was trying to walk to the airport where he thought he could get a ride home. I picked him up like a child. He's had a blister on his foot and it had gangrene and his leg was swelled up to here, and it was very, very bad. He couldn't even walk. I picked him up and lifted him into the back of the jeep, and I asked him how much he thought he weighed. He said 4 stone. I don't know what 4 stone is, but I've had it translated to be about 60 pounds. We drove him, we took a side trip from our mission to the airport. I don't know which airport it was, but there was a B-17 bomber carrying prisoners of war back to England, and I lifted him up and placed him on a stretcher and he was carried aboard the plane, and I shook him hand, and he said, I'll be home tonight, and I'm sure he was. I don't know his name. I don't know where he lived, but he had been a prisoner of war. So when we talk about barbed wire, or saw that barbed wire, I thought that's what we were talking about, someplace where some of our friends might be. I had no idea it was a concentration camp. Now one of the holocaust survivors has challenged me a little bit. He said, You must not speak of it as a death camp, and I said, Henry, there was so much death there, it WAS a death camp. 52,000 men, women and children died in that camp between the time it opened in 1929 until we closed it in April of 1945, and they died there from starvation, from beatings, from torture, from overwork, from shootings, from hangings, and for no other reason that they were born Jewish. The youngest prisoner was little Hannah, 6 years old. What would she be doing in a place like that? She's Jewish. She'll grow up and raise more Jews. Now I've met only 4 survivors of that camp. One of them lives in Vancouver, B.C. I was traveling up there, went to the Jewish Center. They said, Oh, you're a liberator of Buchenwald? Yes. We have a survivor. We'll call him on the phone. He said, Don't let that man leave. I'm coming right down. How do you think I felt waiting for the door to open. What would he look like? What would he say? What would I say to him? I don't have to tell you it was a very emotional meeting. His name is Robbie Weisman. He was taken in a small town in Poland. I don't even know the name. He lived with his Mom, his younger sister and his younger brother and his Dad. They're Jewish. His Dad had a store. His mother was a schoolteacher. When the Germans came, the store was confiscated, Jewish can't teach, mother couldn't teach, Robbie couldn't go to school. What could they do? When the food ran out, they couldn't go out to buy. They couldn't do anything. If any friend came and dropped some food on the doorstep, that would be subject to terrible penalties, maybe even death. Father said, I know, I'll get on a train. The last one out of town. I'll stay in the shadows, buy a ticket, go on the train out into the country and I'll buy some food from the farmer and bring back to feed you. And he did that. Got on the train. I know now SS officers came through, he had no star on his coat, he had no papers, Jews aren't allowed to travel, they jerked his pants down to see if he was circumcised. He was, he's a Jew. He never saw him again. He was taken to a concentration camp. So they're waiting for father to come back. He doesn't come. The Germans are loading all the Jews in the trucks, taking them to the train and shipping them to the camps. Mother says I won't go. This is my home. I live here. They can't do this, but they did. Two soldiers came, knocked down the door. They had a little dog, he ran to bark at the intruder. With a rifle they killed the dog, little toddler brother ran over to see the dog, another rifle butt, the little brother's dead. They went upstairs, grandmas in her bed. They shoot her in her bed, they drag grandfather downstairs, mother holding the little girl, and Robbie and grandfather

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are dragged out, loaded in a truck, and put in a cattle car. 90 or 100 of them. They can't even sit down. Robbie looks through a little crack. He can see it's daytime, then night. Eight days they are locked in that boxcar as the train travels to Auschwitz. When they arrived, grandfather has died. Mother can't work. She's holding the little girl. Go that way. She's on her way to the gas chamber. That's the last Robbie saw of his mother. He looked like he could work. They stripped all his clothes off, shaved him, tattooed his arm, put him in the camp to work. An older prisoner named Daniel gave him a bowl so he'd have something to eat. If you don't have a bowl you get nothing to eat. They fed him a piece of black bread the size of his thumb, ½ a cut of turnip soup every 24 hours and worked them 16 hours a day. As the Russians came closer and closer, suddenly they took 3,000 of the prisoners, Daniel had died by this time, and began marching them west. They arrived at Buchenwald. Of the 3,000, only 300 survived that death march in the winter. If anybody fell out they were shot and left for the farmers to bury. Robbie was one of those who survived. They threw him in the little camp where they kept the children, because they expected him to die that night. He lived 3 ½ months until we came. I'm going to see him. I don't the story that he's going to tell me. When the war was over, I got to come home to my family, my father, my mother, brother, my sister, my dog and my pony, my home. When the war was over, Robbie had nothing. Nothing. He came as an orphan on a ship with a group of orphans to New York. We wouldn't let them land because they might take our jobs, but Canada took him in, and he grew up in a foster home. He was 14 years old when we came. All he had was a little piece of paper that said he was a prisoner at Buchenwald, I looked at it and I did a double take. He was born on my birthday, the second of February. I was just barely 19 and he was just barely 14 that day he was liberated. He's my friend now. We exchange greetings on our birthday. He has a beautiful wife and a lovely family, but no relatives.

Question: What do you think about the Germans today?

Answer: I've been back 4 times. I had the experience the last time with my Czech friends. We were in Czechoslovakia, in the town of Chev, spelled C-h-e-v. We went into a small restaurant. There were two people my age. A man and his wife sitting at a table just across from us. I sat down with my friend Jerry and John (phonetic Cat-ter-jaw-beck), She speaks Russian, German, Czech and English, and she nudged me and said, They are German tourists here on holiday. I looked at the German, he gave me a strange stare. I smiled. He called the waitress over and said something to her and they got up and left, leaving their plates half finished. Jerry said, He told the waitress he would not eat in the same restaurant as an American. I was giving a presentation to a group of University of Washington, telling them this story. When I finished, a young man came with tears in his eyes and he said, Mr. Hymas, I am German. What can I do to comfort him? I said, friends.. I know a survivor that would tell you that you need feel no guilt. You were not even born. I guess he felt a little better. He sent me his wedding announcement, then he went back to Germany. He was getting a Master's Degree at the University of Washington.

Question: You know, it doesn't quite answer my question, though.

Answer: I don't have any hatred for the German people, but the war criminals deserved to be hated for the wickedness and the atrocities and the criminal intent that they had.

Question: It's pretty complicated, who's who though. Who had guilt and who doesn't have guilt?

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Answer: I followed the camp commander. His name was K-o-c-h-e. (Koch) His wife, Elsa Koch was the one who liked the tattoos and collected them. She was arrested and put on trial, and she decided. He had committed suicide, and she decided that the Americans would have mercy on her if she were pregnant. So somehow she got herself pregnant. She was sentenced to life imprisonment and she later died in prison.

Question: so when you went to Japan and you were, because you're very, we've only talked to a couple people have been at both theaters.

Answer: There are only two divisions that were. Mine was one of them. Well, I told you we lost this man. We hunted for him in the snow, and we found his body with a knife in his back the next day. When my division was deactivated in Japan in 1946, I came home, sailed back into Seattle, traveled back to my home in Utah, met my family, again was with my friend Ken Wiser, found my childhood sweetheart. I'd met her in the 6th grade. I went on a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to the North Central Mission, which was Minneapolis and South Dakota, came home, married my sweetheart, went to college, graduated in Business Administration, and worked in the aerospace industry. I have 4 children, 16 grandchildren, and 5 great-grandchildren. I worked for Martin, I worked for Convair, I worked for Thiokol building rockets. I've met all 7 of the original astronauts because we built the rockets they flew on in their Mercury project, and I retired in the commercial airplane division here in Seattle. I worked in Renton. I lived in Issaquah for about 30 years, and last 4 years I moved to Whidbey Island where my home is now.

Question: Did you, you must have met some of the German scientists in the program. Did you meet Von Braun himself?

Answer: I know of them, but I didn't ever communicate with them. I did have an engineer that worked with me. His name was Werner (phonetic ji-got-ta) and Werner fought on the other side, and was captured by the Russians and put in a prison camp. When the war ended, he made his way across into Sweden and somehow made it to Canada, made it to Chicago, married an American lady, became an American citizen, graduated with an engineering degree and worked with me in our same small group at Boeing. He would never discuss it with me. I liked him. I worked with him. I went to his funeral. He was a good American, but he absolutely refused to discuss anything about World War II. At his funeral, I learned more about his service from those who spoke, his friends and his family, and his widow than he ever told me during the years we worked together.

Question: So he was on the Russian front, was he?

Answer: Yes, he was captured on the Russian front.

Question: So were you friends?

Answer: Yes, we were friends. We went together quite often. He teased me a lot because he always thought I dressed too nice for the workplace. I said, I only wear a tie and jacket. He said, Well, why do you do that? I said, Well, that's what the managers and what the directors and that's what the principal bosses wear. If you want to be one, you've gotta look like one. And I was one.

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Question: So that was a little strange that here's someone that was a hard thing about. We had one interview where the man, his wife passed away. He married a German immigrant, and his father-in-law died who was a German officer in World War II. He was a German. He was an American B-17 pilot. His wife was a civilian, and he thought it was so strange that 40-some years later, he was walking in front of the coffin of this ex-German officer, and here he was, had been a B-17 pilot. This is how, in 40 years, how everything changes, and ...

Answer: Well, while I was in Japan, I was invited by the family of this girl who was my interpreter to their little home. It was a souvenir shop and a hotel and a home combined, and they wanted to, invited me to a Christmas dinner. Now when the war was over, they had very little. No souvenirs to sell, nobody was staying at their hotel, they were very poor. So I went down to the galley, and I grabbed as much spam, and butter, and whatever I could find to take to this little dinner, and it was held in their home, and it was a traditional bamboo mats, and it was cold and they had the tatsui with the coals and the coverlet that you all sit around cross-legged and put your hands under. We had this little dinner, and they 'd invited a guest and his name was Iwo O. Tanaka, and he was a Zero Pilot. Just a year older than I. And the home was the home of the Ono family. O-n-o. And the girl who had translated for me was named Terika Ono, and she had two sisters named Setseko and Mutseko, and Uncle Sato was there, and Mama-san with Baby-san and they were all dressed in their beautiful kimonos and they played the shamisen and the koto. And they wanted me to teach them how to do the waltz. Can you imagine, a GI in his uniform and stocking feet, my boots were outside. I'm trying to show this beautiful young girl with her hair piled up, her kimono, her obi, how to do the waltz in those little white socks that had the big toe separate from the rest of them? And they had a little wind up record player, and they had a little record and it was Bing Crosby, singing Blue Hawaii, which happens to be a fox trot. Tanaka's my friend. He flew a Zero fighter plane. I always thought he was a suicide pilot, a kamikaze, but he wasn't. He flew for the Navy, and he was in the Navy, and he flew to Korea once and back. We have still communicated after all these years. Every Japan holiday New Year he sends me a lottery ticket, and I wrote to him and said, Tanaka, if I win, what will be the prize? Oh, it's a toaster or a coffee maker, or a mixer. But he has a family. I've been to see him once. I went back to Japan on my way to a work assignment in Indonesia, and I stopped in Japan, and I went to his home, and they got, no. We went to the Ono Hotel. It's still operated by the same, descendents of the same family. They put on a spread that would make a king blush. 12 courses. Tanaka and I enjoyed that night together. Two old enemies now fast friends. I took with me a plaque that I had made. It has a picture of Tanaka in front of the Navy rising-sun flag with some words about his reunion as a serviceman. And I took a picture of myself, or had one taken of me standing beside an American flag behind me. And I put this on a plaque, and I put, Iwo O. Tanaka Nipponese Tomodachi, 1945 to.. Japan 1945 and in Japan, I think it was in '93 that I went, and then my name. And I had this in a package, and so after we'd eaten and we were talking, and we had an interpreter there. It was a young woman who had come and stayed in my daughter's home as an exchange student. She'd met me at the airport and taken me all around and helped me find Tanaka and helped me find Teriko and the ones that I'd known at that time. Well, she was there, and so I brought this plaque out, and I said to Tanaka, Our countries were at war many years ago. Now we're at peace and you are my friend, and I gave him this plaque. Now Japanese people don't show emotion very much, but tears came down his cheeks and he gripped my hand in both hands, and Atsiko was crying. It was a very emotional thing. Very emotion.

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Question: We're at the end of another tape, here...