

Leon Bass  
Oral History Transcript

Leon Bass: Finally we came to a place where we stopped. And we were not far from Weimar.

That was where we were heading. And that's where the Colonel said to a Lieutenant, he said, "Round up some of the men in the Intelligence reconnaissance section, maybe three or four. I want you to go over to Weimar, see what the town looks like, and see what else is over there. I think it's what we've been hearing about the concentration camp."

So he came out. Bruno came out and came over to me and two others, and he said, "Come with me." So we followed him and got aboard a truck. But I leaned over and I said, "Sir, where are we going?" He said, "We're going to a concentration camp." I said to myself, *What? A concentration camp?* I didn't know anything about concentration camps; in all the training they had given me, no one ever mentioned a concentration camp.

But on this day in April, in 1945, I was to have the shock of my life. I was going to walk through the gates of a concentration camp called Buchenwald. And I wasn't ready for that, totally unprepared for that kind of an experience. But I could never, ever forget the day that spring day in April, when I walked through the gates and I saw in front of me what I now call the walking dead. I saw human beings, human beings that had been beaten, starved, and tortured, and denied everything. They were standing in front of me, skin and bone. They had skeletal faces with deep-set eyes.

And they were standing there. Some of them were holding on to each other to keep from falling. Others were on the ground. They were dying. And I looked at them. And I said, "My God, who are these people? What have they done that was so terrible that could cause anyone to treat them like this?" I didn't know. I didn't know, honestly.

But I saw a young man. He was, he was not in any bad shape. He was much younger than the others, and he spoke English quite well. So I talked to him. I said, "Who are these people?" And he started telling me. He said that they're Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, some were Catholics. The whole—so many of them, different groups, some of them were unionists, belonged to the union, some were communists, homosexuals.

He went on with a litany of groups that had been placed in the camp. I said, "For what? Why?" He said, "The Nazis said they weren't good enough, they weren't fit to live. They could be terminated and murdered." Now, something registered with me. I had been told I wasn't good enough. Nobody ever said those words to me, but that's what they told me when they said, "You can't drink here."

These people were told they weren't good enough; therefore, they were going to be murdered, terminated. I said, "My God." And then he took me to a building where the

inmates were sleeping. I went over there and he told me so many were put in there because they didn't have much room and so they jammed so many into one building.

So I went inside, but I couldn't go any further. You see, the odor, the stench that comes from death and human waste—it was overpowering. It was more than I could bear. I stood there and I looked and I knew I couldn't stay because of that odor. But I turned. And when I did, I looked down there on the bed of straw and rags was a man, a human being. He was skin and bone, and he was trying so desperately to look at me with that skeletal face and those deep-set eyes. But he was having a hard time. He had been starved for so long. But finally he did, he looked up at me. He said nothing, nor did I.

So I opened the door, and I stepped across gravel. And I closed the door. The young man said, “In a building nearby, you will find all parts of the human body ... that they're going to do medical experiments [on].” They didn't use any anesthesia, they just did the surgery. Whatever part of the body they wanted to keep, they would take it and put it in a jar and put on a label, and they put it on the table nearby.

And that's what they would do for no reason at all, except that they wanted to try something out, experimenting on human beings. I went to another building and this one was where they tortured people. They tortured them. They—I could see the table that they were on. I could see some of the parts of the bodies that they kept, that they put on hooks up on the wall.

Someone had done some paintings about showing what they had been doing. I don't know what—they were the most evil people. I left that place, and I said, “I have seen enough.” I thought I would try to get out of this place and go home. And I walked past the dead and the dying, you know. And I said to myself, *Where are the children?* I'm seeing so much, but I'm not seeing any children.

And I asked him, I said to that guy, “Where are the children?” He told me, “The children are in the camp, but you haven't seen them?” No, I didn't see not one. But when I went outside, I saw the clothing of little children, the little children that didn't survive, up against the wall; there were mountains of clothes, caps, sweaters, all kinds of things.

But I never saw a child. So I walked away from my friends. And I walked a few feet, not too many, to another building. And I saw the dead bodies stacked up outside of the building. This was a crematorium. This is where they put the dead bodies. And I just couldn't understand it. But I went inside and I saw what was left in one of the big ovens and others were waiting outside. They were to be taken later on and they would be ashes, too.

So I came out of there. I walked back to the gate where we had come in and I stood there waiting for my friends to come. But while I waited, I didn't—I realized that I wasn't the same anymore. Something had happened to me. That transformation had come.

It told me, *Leon, you're not the same. You now know that you had something to fight for.* This was what you saw. This is what you knew, and this is what you saw and experienced when you were in Mississippi: People were not good enough, and therefore, they could be terminated. You could get pushed away. They were not good enough.

And so I changed and I said, *Yes, I had something to fight for.* So my friends came back and we got back up on the truck. We left that place in silence. You see, no one said a word about what we saw at Buchenwald.