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Jack Blanco: World War II Survivor

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Student Interviewer's Name: Rosalba Valera

Interviewee Name: Dr. Jack Blanco

About Jack Blanco:

Jack Blanco was born in Chicago in 1929 from immigrant parents Frederick Ross, from Austria, and Katherine Kiessling, from Germany. During the planning of the wedding, Jack Blanco's father left his mother Katherine, she was already pregnant. Due to this circumstance, he was raised by his single mother, who worked in sweatshops and he was the only child growing up. He was left with various babysitters who he claims abused him during his mother's absence. His life changed forever at the age of ten when he and his mother decided to visit his grandparents in Germany.

Jack Blanco's experience during this time of war marked the rest of his life. The war ended in 1945, and finally, a year later he had the opportunity to go back home. Later on he was drafted for the Korean War, and during that time he discovered the SDA church, which is now his denomination. After witnessing two wars in his life time he got married to a young lady named Marion. He ended up working as a bible worker and then later on a Pastor. His wife and he share two children and grandchildren. In this interview, he shares his experience of how he ended up in Germany during World War II, and how he got out of Germany after the War.

Interviewer: Rosalba Valera (RV)

Interviewee: Jack Blanco (JB)

RV: Who were your parents, and where are they from?

JB: Well (paused) you want the names of my parents? (I nod). Oh! My ahhh... father came from Vienna, Austria, immigrated to this country. And umm, (deep breath and sigh to speak) His first name was Frederick, and his last name was Ross, R O, with two dots on top, S S but when he came to New York, and they looked at his spelling of his name, they said, "what are those two dots there for? We don't need that. So they took the two dots away and changed it to Ross. See what I mean? (Looks at me to agree and I nod). Know a little bit about German? (I explain to him that in Spanish we use accents as well). When they took the two dots off... that's English!(his eyes get big) My mother's name was Katherine Kiesling, K I E S L I N G she is from Bavaria, and they met in Chicago, both immigrants. Okay? (Looking for my response).

RV: How did you end up in Germany, and what were your reasons?

JB: (Interrupted my questions a little bit) let's back up a bit, they were planning to get married, my father and mother were planning to get married. As they were getting to

getting ready to get married and of course they had been together for a while, and ummm, planning the wedding, she would of call my father every evening after work because they didn't have cellphones. One evening she calls and there was no answer. Did I tell you that(I respond yes), I think I told you that already. Then of course she found out that he skipped town. Did I tell you that? (I responded with yes). So you have that information already. Do you want me to say that again? (I responded with "I'm good").

RV: So I am guessing you were born after that and your mother raised you. After your father left your mother what happened?

JB: She worked ten hours a day. What the immigrants worked at sweatshops. She worked at a branch from that at a bakery ten hours a day. She had to put me out there for babysitters. I don't know if I told you that, babysitters mistreated me. One time she came early from work (cleared his throat) had to climb three steps on the backside of the apartment building where they had wooden balconies with wooden steps to go up. She went up there, door was open and I was sitting on the floor crying. She said, "Why is he crying?" They told her that if he stops crying they would give him something to eat. She said the reason why he is crying is because he is hungry.

RV: How did you end up in Germany?

JB: Well when I was nine years old, ten years old my mother said, "lets go visit your grandparents", her parents that she haven't seen for seventeen years. Did I tell you that? (He pauses waiting for my answer). So we went over there on a boat, the boat was called Columbus, the boats name.

RV: Where did the boat ship off from?

JB: Probably from New York. We took the train from Chicago to New York and then a boat to Germany. Probably to Bremen, that was the city where the boats came into. Cause back in 1938 and 1939 there was not much flying going on. I went on a boat that took about eight days to get there. Then went to the farm and saw my grandparents that pick us up and took the train to the farm. The farm was great and animals, and hey the sky was blue what did you know about that? The skyscrapers were blocking out the sun. Then umm I was so enjoying it that umm, my mother saved up her certification hoping to stay there a month.

RV: What month was this? Do you remember what season?

JB: Probably in June, that's my guess, or it could have been July.

RV: So summer-time you want to say. That you guys went to Germany, both of you.

JB: And then after (pause) then my grandfather said when it was time for my mother to leave...

RV: How many months after did your mother decide to leave Germany?

JB: She had her verification for three to four weeks, you know, and then it was time for her for her to go back. So she wanted take me back, didn't I tell you that (I nodded) so then my grandfather said, "well he enjoyed it so much and yeah he needs to work on the farm for a little, get some sunshine, develop some muscles, and a little bit of you know"... (giggles) Why won't you let him stay out of school for a year? Well if you ask a ten years old, " you want to stay out of school? (He waits for my response and I say yes). See? (He laughs with me). I said yes and, oh, when it was time for my mother to leave, got on the ox cart and went to the next town to catch the train and then oh my word... did I tell you this already? When it was time for her to leave... I didn't want to let her go. Imagine, the only person in the whole world that loved me. That belonged to me and I belonged to her. So I held on to her, well it was too late, my grandparents had to prime my fingers away from holding on to her.

RV: How old were you at this time?

JB: About ten years old.

RV: What was the name of the town you were at?

JB: My grandfather's town?

RV: Yes

JB: Hohenburg,

RV: Howenburg?

JB: H O H E N B U R G (spelling it out for me), Hohenburg. (going back to his mother's story)... stood back on the platform and then the train pulled out. Did I tell you this? (I respond with a yes). It's like pulling a rubber band and it stretches, what happens to the rubber band? (Waits for an answer)... it's going to snap and my heart snap. The pain, my mother is gone. So I refused to eat for three days. After a while you know the stomach starts growling and you're hungry and you have to eat.

RV: Did your grandparents treat you well?

JB: Oh yes, very loving and very kind. Yeah.

RV: What year was this?

JB: 1939, well wait a minute WWII started, that was '38. Then I stayed there for a year, obviously. Then I said oh I got all excited to see my mother and then the war started and all borders were closed.

RV: When all borders closed what was going through the minds of your grandparents? What was going through your mind as a child?

JB: (Pause)... Have you seen the film the Sound of Music? (I say yes) Well people were escaping over the mountains to Switzerland. Right?(waiting for my approval) and umm but my grandfather did not dare take a chance to, umm, take me over the mountains over to Switzerland because he had oppose Hitler to power and spend some time in jail, prison. Hitler was elected... was it '33 or something like that, it doesn't stick to my mind. He had oppose, see ummm, a good share of Bavaria, that section in Germany that's call Bavaria, opposed to Hitler. The northern part Prussia was very supportive of Hitler. Southern part was very opposing, he brought labor union and people were forced to support him... my perspective as a child he couldn't do anything because if he tried to get me over into Switzerland and they caught him(gesture of cutting of throat) he was dead.

RV: He had one strike...

JB: That's right.

RV: After the borders closed, what were the events to follow?

JB: I couldn't get out, what is ten years old supposed to do? So I went to school in Germany right there in the town in Hohenburg.

RV: For how long, knowing that you were American?

JB: Let's see, about three years or four years at the most. I went to German school and then of course I finished elementary school.

RV: Can you describe what those schools were teaching at the time? If you can remember anything.

JB: You had to belong to the Hitler youth. Everybody had too (clear of throat).

RV: What is the Hitler youth?

JB: Well, umm, they are the supportive of Hitler.

RV: Was this propaganda?

JB: Well they wore little Hitler uniform... learn the salute to Hitler and all that, yeah.

RV: Did you learn all this?

JB: Yeah, well we had no choice.

RV: As a child did you understand what all this meant? Or as a child were you just told?

JB: I was told to do it.

RV: You had no idea of what it meant or anything?

JB: No

RV: So three years past and you were in a German school and you were just being a kid, and then you were stopped because you were American?

JB: Well no, I wanted to continue my education because that is all, how far the education went in that town, was elementary school. And my grandfather said I am not going to stand in your way. What am I going to say to your mother if I stopped your education? So a yeah go ahead if you want to go to high school or a higher school. So I had to fill out a paper. I don't know if I told you this or not, I had to fill out an application. To apply to a higher school and so I turned it in. In the paper it ask you what is your name? Where were you born? So they knew I was American. Well I send the paper in, and then a month or two later I got the notice to please come to Berlin to go to school. You know. I got the notice to come to Berlin; actually the town is outside of Berlin Körperich (starts spelling the town). So my grandfather took me to the train in the next town. Went to Berlin and I asked for direction and they said, "yeah, you got to on this train which will take you to Körperich." As it was going the train people kept getting off, getting off. Well the train got almost empty, not quite but almost empty. So then they announced Körperich, you know. Stop, get off. Okay well because the train stops in different towns you know. This is Körperich so get off. I looked around and so one of the Hitler or S.S. guards came up to me. He had a brown shirt on, a band swastika, and boots. "Is your name so and so?" "Yeah". "Well come with me." I said okay.

RV: How old were you at this time?

JB: Fourteen.

RV: Did you have a feeling inside?

JB: NO, I mean all I knew was that I was going to go to school. So I went there and there was barb wired, oh and the guard dogs and the guards.

RV: Did your grandfather go with you?

JB: Oh no, I went by myself; my grandfather had to take care of the farm. I was going to go to school and he had to take care of the farm. You know, farming in those days was like

farming in the days of Abraham Lincoln, you know. Everything was done by hand. If he is not there... (pauses and I say "everything stops.") Yeah.

RV: Barb wire, guard dogs, guard (he responds, yup). Concentration camp or slave labor camp?

JB: Well you need to understand that there is concentration camp, labor camp, slave labor camp. You know different camps. My whole experience was slave labor camp.

RV: What was slave labor camp in general like for everyone? The normal.

JB: Umm, well, let me explain it this way. You know throughout WWII there were different labor camps. Labor camps sometimes would mean they simply restricted your mobility and actions. Some of the Japanese people in America were put in labor camps. Okay? But labor camps were simply restricting their mobility.

RV: Who were the types of people who went in that? That only restricted their mobility

JB: I really don't know whether there was just a plain labor camp that restrict people in Germany. There was a concentration camp. You probably saw Corrie concentration camp, the film (I was not familiar). They restrict your mobility, and you know restriction of food and so on. There's no (pause) terrible beating and stuff. You know and of course when they decided they will put you in a gas chamber. Gas you to death.

RV: That's in labor camp?

JB: No that's in concentration camp. Like a lot of the Jews went to concentration camp.

RV: Gypsies?

JB: They put them in there and periodically put them in the gas chamber to kill them. You know, and umm, but then there's a slave labor camp, and they, umm, had many people in Germany in slave labor camps. In different countries that they put them in there to get as much work from them as you could. Umm, and if you collapsed they will carry you out, and that would be the end.

RV: So even if you fainted or anything?

JB: That's right.

RV: Would they kill you or what were the rumors?

JB: I don't know, but some of my friends they collapsed and carried them out, and never saw them again. They probably killed them you know or they would bury them. When they were fainted or whatever... when you collapsed, you are not good for anything anymore. They get away with you, and never find out what they did with them. Whether they buried

them, well that was (pause) in some cases they buried them alive. You know while they were still unconscious, still breathing, yeah.

RV: What was the daily routine in your labor camp, in your enslavement labor camp?

JB: They would get you up at six o'clock. Umm, well let me back up a little bit. They had bunk beds where you slept in bunk beds and umm, the places were of course filled with lice, bugs, and everything. You know, once in a while they would take you in to a gas chamber, and sometimes we were afraid that we would be put to death, but we would umm... they de-lice you. Don't ask me the details. Would put you in some kind of holding with some type of chemical to get rid of the lice and the bugs. So we got up six in the morning and yeah of course I got up to an ammunition factory. Did I tell you what we had for breakfast? For breakfast about a cup of coffee and a slice of bread. At noon, a bowl of watery soup, literally a bowl of watery soup and two slices of bread. In the evening black coffee and a slice of bread. That was it.

RV: That was it? No bargaining or nothing?

JB: Nothing

RV: Did you make friends?

JB: Oh yeah, there was umm, (pause to think) one guy from Russia he was in there, and another political guy from Germany, I particularly became friends with those two.

RV: Was the Russian a soldier who got caught?

JB: No, he was younger. About the same age. You know fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, around there. He wasn't a Russian soldier.

RV: He happened to get caught like you.

JB: He just got picked up here or probably from Russia from his parents. From Russian parents who probably escaped from Russia and because you had a lot of people escape from Russia and Ukraine. Had escape from Russia and went to Germany, they may have picked him up from there. I don't know.

RV: Did they survive? Your German and Russian friend?

JB: Yeah, they umm, (pause) well, the three of us escaped and yeah all went different directions.

RV: Were you ever transferred to another slave labor camp?

JB: Yeah, we were transferred to outside of Berlin down to Leipzig.

RV: You only been to two?

JB: I've been to another one Pegnitz near Nuremburg. Yeah, sure it was three.

RV: Did you guys get one day off, or it was seven days that you worked, worked, Worked?

JB: I don't remember getting a day off.

RV: There was no break?

JB: (Thinking really hard) Not that I remember.

RV: Was this an all men enslavement camp? Were there women? Were there children in there or all ages?

JB: There were women in there, because the section next to me there were women working there. I saw some of them collapse and carry them out and that was it.

RV: Was it equal work for men and women?

JB: (His shoulders went up) All I know I had to do what I was told to do.

RV: What were the jobs they made you do?

JB: All I know was I was working on a machine making ammunition. I don't know this was about seventy years ago, you know.

RV: Now that you were in the enslavement camps, were you aware of what was going on?

JB: No, all I knew was that Germany and United States were at odds. There was no communication and no nothing. You had no idea what was going on.

RV: What about your family from the outside? Were they aware of you?

JB: No, they were not aware. When I was being transferred... what I am going to tell you. They put us on the train and stop a town we got off the train. They start marching us towards the gate of Leipzig, Germany. As I was walking towards the gate with all the others, all of a sudden I found myself in the field. Did I tell you this? (I respond with a no). The barb wired and the guards were all in the distance. They were way out there. Like the story of Philip and the eunuch. He baptizes the eunuch on the road outside of Jerusalem. What happened (waits for my response)? Got away of the city. I got planted way out in the feels. I was out there by myself and umm, so then of course I away, escaped sort of speak and umm, way my way to my grandfather's farm. It was a long way, but anyway, so when I got there he was surprised. Where have you been, look how skinny you look and shakily. What's wrong? Weren't you in school? You know there were no cell phones... my grandmother made me a good meal, a great farm meal. Oh wow! The next morning my

grandfather called me son. My grandfather called me son I'm afraid that you are going to have to turn yourself in. Did I tell you that? Because if they find out I'm harboring a fugitive they will get me and kill me. So I turned myself in and was escorted to a near camp near Nuremberg... the next day I continued slave labor.

RV: After that was that the last time you saw your grandparents?

JB: No

RV: After you saw your grandparents and had your grandmother's meal how many months or years until you were liberated?

JB: Probably umm, the war ended at '45, and I was sixteen. (Paused to think) Probably a year at least I think or more two. Let's say about a year to the end of was, yup.

RV: Do you feel that it made you stronger, did it open your view, were your beliefs shattered, anything? What impact was left?

JB: Well my grandfather and my family they were catholic. I think did I tell you that? So I grew up catholic and a very faithful Catholic. My grandfather was very kind and so on and of course, before I was picked up and put into labor camp, umm, I served as an altar boy in the local church (Smiles saying this). While I was going to school, German school, I often served as an altar boy, yeah. So umm, I never, what should I say? I never lost faith in God, you know, I never lost.

RV: Was your faith stronger in God?

JB: Well (pause), I want to tell you that all labor camp experience benumb you. Where you were just kind of numb, you know. I mean your emotions (pause), let's say that in labor camp they treated you as a thing, yup. Yeah and so, umm, there is no, what should I say, no human touch there. You know what I mean, (I nod), yup. I mean what would happen if your parents treated you like an object?

RV: I would feel like an object.

JB: That's right you got it.

RV: What was the sign that your heart felt happy or free? When was that moment? How did the day of liberation feel?

JB: Well the umm, I think you skip a few things in there. Yeah umm when the Americans of course invaded Germany, right? (Waits for my head nod) they went to Nuremberg and ended up liberated me. I ended up, what do you call it? Re-Re- Repatriation camp, something like that. Umm, re, umm... anyway rehabilitation camp, yup. Had a little more

food to eat. We didn't have to work and all that. So I was under the Americans for about a year, yeah.

RV: How old were you and what year was this?

JB: Well it was probably '45, you know and umm... sixteen, seventeen. Before the Americans came and umm you know took us out of labor camp the three of us the German, Russian escaped.

RV: You escaped what?

JB: The labor camp. So I went, we made our way home. The Russian went his way, the German went on a way, and I went another way. Of course I went home to my grandparents, and I just came ahead of the Americans, I just came ahead. I got there that evening and the Americans troops pulled in... just a few hours before the americans pulled in. When Americans pulled in, in their minds I was German boy, German young man, yup. So I talked to the Americans, and said you know I am an American, I am not a German, I am an American. The thing is seven years have passed almost eight years. I never spoken English for seven years. So I could not talk it, so they said how you can be an American if you can't even talk English.

RV: I understand because I live in two worlds English and Spanish. My accent changes according to where I am and I have to retake it and relearn the language again.

JB: You know (chuckles) so you're an American and you can't even speak English. They said do you have any papers? Well the Nazis have taken away all my papers. So I could not prove anything, you know. Then another miracle happened. The local mailman in this village came to my grandfather's house saying I got a letter from America for you. It was a letter from my mother. Oh I've been praying for you, I contacted the Red Cross, gave them money to find you, and they don't know where you are, on and on and on. Wow, how are you in all of that? So I took the letter to the Americans a letter from my mother that I just got. They said how you get it. This is what German mailman brought. He said the war is not over. You know they said the war did not end until June, July, something like that. I have to look it up again. So, this was just a before the war ended. They said that there is no private mail coming from the United States to Germany. No, obviously a war is going on. Well I said, "I don't know but here it is." So they said, "have a seat," so I sat down. It must have been for three hours and they came back after that. Apparently, they contacted America, obviously. They said, "well we checked it out and it is genuine." Just go back to the farm and we will contact you a little while and start you up in the camp to rehabilitate you, you know. So I did, and then a couple months they call me and took me to the, that's not the right word, rehabilitation. Repatriation or something, I don't know. They called me to come to this repatriation camp and I was there for a month or so. They would put me on board to wait and see when the next ship will come and go to the states. Finally, my

name came up and put me on two transport and I came to New York Harbor. Oh my word (Excitement in his voice)! I saw the statue of Libertyyyyyyyy. Oh my word, I'm home free, I'm home free, I'm home free. No more guard dogs, no more soldiers, no more shooting, killing, beating, whatever. Let me tell you something, nobody appreciates freedom until they don't have it. Nobody appreciates it until they don't have it (emphasis). I was ready to kiss the ground home free.

RV: Was mom there in New York waiting for you?

JB: Well no, my cousin picked me up because somehow the train from Chicago got delayed. So he picked me up and took me to my aunt's house. Then the next day my mother came.

RV: How was your physical? Were you under weight? Height?

JB: When I got back I weighed about eighty five pounds and I was five foot tall, seventeen years old. I didn't have to go on a diet to lose weight (smiles at me). Then after being back for a year I put on, I grew on six inches and I put on fifty pounds. Then two years after I got back the Berlin air lift started. Have you study about Berlin airlift?