

We're continuing our discussion with Mr. Victor Wegard. Mr. Wegard, in your experience both as an investigator of Nazi war crimes, and later on as part of the defense team for a number of those accused, there must have been a number of cases along the way that stand out as particularly striking or particularly frustrating. Do one or two of these spring to mind?

Well, I think every case that we handled, and we were able successfully close the file, and put away for the future was successful. The frustrating ones do stay in the mind, and they're really too many of them to numerate. But each one of them is important.

And one in particular stands out to this day as a total miscarriage, in my opinion, of justice on the part of our own United States government. That sometimes I'm ashamed to admit that I've spent all my life, and those of my compatriots, in the service defending our country and our American way of doing things. And see decisions made by some levels of government that are anathema to the American way, the American awareness of things in life, the American fair play criteria.

For example, in August 11, 12, and 13, and 14 of 1941, the Germans very methodically, very systematically, massacred 44,000 Jews in the Polish Ukraine in a town called Kowel. K-O-W-E-L. This town and the 44,000 people was deeply involved in the Luftwaffe program of building fast-forward airstrips in support of the Wehrmacht and its plunge into Russia, approximately 50 to 150 miles behind the then fluid front lines.

And as won't be the case, the officer-- in many instances, a civilian in charge of the project-- would receive orders from up above to move on to the next project. Nothing further said or done. Move on to the next project. However, eliminate any vestige of cooperation by the inhabitants in the previous one. In other words, exterminate all the slave laborers that worked on that project. Orders came down for the SS to eliminate 44,000 Jews in Polish Ukraine.

I vaguely remember this when it happened. There were some rumors in the newspapers of massacres going on in the Ukraine. In fact, the name Kowel struck to mind. And remember we were not at all even remotely involved in war crime activities at that time. But it was an event that seemed to shake the world in mammoth proportions. 44,000 in just a few days massacred.

So that in 1945, in the late spring of 1945, when one of our informants, probably Simon Wiesenthal, brought to our attention that the chief perpetrator of the Kowel massacre of 1941 was alive and well. And recently released from our internment camp at Hirschberg, and living at home in Bamberg, Germany. We received permission-- with that type of a case where some mass atrocity, we received permission to go further.

While we were, by order of priority, concentrating more on cases involving military personnel as opposed to strictly civilian personnel, we were still permitted to take on any crimes against humanity cases. Atrocities, wherever they showed up-- an atrocity was an atrocity-- in addition to war crimes cases [? that popped up ?].

This was certainly both. The war crimes, even though it didn't involve American military forces or even allied military forces, and definitely, an atrocity case. We captured Andreas Müller, the engineer in charge of that project, at his home in Bamberg in 1945, in the late spring of '45. Brought him to the Lennéstrasse in Nuremberg that day, and he tried to commit suicide on us that night. He was very cooperative with subsequent interrogation. He acknowledged the orders that came from up above, which were now part of the main trials going on in Nuremberg, and particularly in the case against Goering.

Orders came from the Luftwaffe to exterminate these towns, and Kowel was just one of them. At the main trial in Nuremberg, they were talking about dozens of towns, hundreds of thousands of people exterminated. But this one little town, this one little case seemed to appeal to us completely. Primarily because we had the principal perpetrator right in our grasp.

We developed the case against Müller. We could find only two or three other possible perpetrators involved, but we knew we had a weak case against them. We had a strong case against Müller because we flew to the Ukraine, we picked up seven live witnesses, flew them back to Dachau to the witness center. They were

going to testify.

They saw him not only in existence there every single day, and giving orders to build the strip, and orders to his troops to begin firing on the villages, but actually deliver coup de grace walking around. One of those that may still be swearing, shooting. Müller was a fierce looking individual. He was a Junker, a brilliant engineer, came from a long line of engineers. He had fierce Heidelberg dueling scars on his face, and he was much respected among his peers.

So he would have been what was considered an aristocrat among--

He was an aristocrat. Number of times, he tried to commit suicide. He tried to commit suicide in the Lennéstrasse in Nuremberg, twice at Dachau. We had him down there. We brought him back to Nuremberg, tried again. Yet, he would never plead guilty. Only that because he was ordered to do what he did. He acknowledged everything that he was accused of doing. How do you plead not guilty? There's your psyche.

We remanded the case to Wiesbaden, the theater war crimes judge advocate section, for trial and it was scheduled to go on in Dachau. The very week that we remanded it to trial, we received wired instructions from Washington signed, "we understand Stettinius, secretary of state, to drop the action against Andreas Müller." Dropped the case, released the man, and as we subsequently found out, we needed him.

We Americans needed him to build up our own airfields in Germany. The Iron Curtain was then falling. And he was instrumental in building up Fürstenfeldbruck in Bavaria. He died in bed a very wealthy man in 1961. There's a case unfinished. To us, it's frustrating. We had the evidence against the man. He personally killed several of these people. He's got the blood of 44,000 others on his hands, permitted to live out his life peacefully.

So in this case, there wasn't even the covert action that has been attributed to bringing Nazi war criminals to freedom in order to fight communism, so to speak. This was a case where at the highest levels of government, there was condonation of this action.

Highest levels of our government.

Yeah.

Was there ever any legal justification? The actual reason was that we needed this man skills or knowledge or whatever to do something for our own purposes. Was there ever any legal reason given why he should not be held--

None whatsoever.

None whatsoever.

It's an arbitrary decision, drop the action.

Wow.

Wow. There were many reasons given as we later-- we complained about it. Colonel Bates and I went to Wiesbaden, and was summarily chased out of the office up there as we protested this. We were told, in no uncertain terms, that look, we've been wasting a lot of time with these cases. This man committed no crimes against the Army, no crimes against Americans.

What they were implying was that his only crime was against foreign Jews. Therefore, unimportant, drop it. Greater things, bigger things coming. And that attitude, I'm afraid, prevailed from that point on. From that point on, that to me, was the death knell of the American War crimes era.

To your knowledge, at least, did any other government, Polish or Soviet, ever express an interest in this man?

No. Whatsoever.

None whatsoever.

Right. His crimes were solely against Jews.

At the time, you mentioned that this stood out as a particularly egregious example of justice miscarried. Was there any indication in other cases that, in effect, your own side was working against you in trying to obtain justice?

Well, in many instances, the normal botch-up in bureaucracy, the red tape that you go through, a lack of experience at the other end-- really, who had experience in these matters except those of us who were in, let's say, in the trenches? We learned the hard way. And we would forward our recommendations up to Wiesbaden. They would come back "we do not consider it germane enough to issue that you raised," whatever it may be, and the case was dropped.

We lost many. What we think was, could have been an important war criminal. At least we made no effort to turn him over to any of the allied forces that might have an interest in him. Everyone seemed to be going his own way.

We got to a point now, there's a concern American military forces-- forget British. American military forces? If not, drop it. And that was a phase out of the war crimes program. It just disappeared.

Did any of this appear attributable to the fact that there was, in fact, a divided command? There were American zones. There were Soviet zones, French zones, British zones.

Had nothing to do with it.

Nothing to it?

Nothing to it. They had created a monster by creating us, the war crimes team with rather ill-defined purposes. I think the teams, in general, all nine of us, all nine teams performed well. In some instances, over and above what our duties may really have called for. Worked day and night. We tried to see that justice was done. But we didn't always get the cooperation from our own peers, much less of the government's.

It was frustrating. Now you're faced with a choice. Your conscience bothers you. You know damn well that you had some bigwigs sitting there in the pen, and you know that they got out. And the feeling of personal culpability begins coming over you after a while. So let's set about these things the better. I really feel that way.

I keep thinking of the days I used to traipse through Hirschberg with over 3,000 suspected war criminals in there. And knowing in retrospect, there was Mengele. There was Barbie. There were some of the biggies. Let them all get out. Now, now, we're spending millions of dollars trying to find them. It's a little too late. We lack the sincerity to start a program, probably as important as this, and carry it through. That's my opinion there.

Do you think this is because we regard yesterday's enemy as today's friend, and we have new antagonists, and therefore, we--

I think you hit it right on the head. I think we saw that back in '45 when we got the telegram from Stettinius. Let's look at it. Who are our best economic partners in the world today? Germany and Japan.

Let me ask you this question. You are now a private citizen with a nonmilitary profession and so on. Yet, you have kept involved and abreast of this issue of pursuing war crimes, and establishing responsibility, and returning to camps, like Flossenbürg and Dachau.

You've gathered material and have been corresponded with by people, like Elie Wiesel and others. What has kept you going? What has motivated you? And to what extent does your own Jewishness have something to do with it?

My own Jewishness has very little to do with it I'd like to believe. I'm of the belief that it can, probably will, happen again unless we really begin nipping it in the bud today. And the answer is education.

You see yourself as an educator?

That's all I want to see myself as, as an educator bringing out the truth. It did happen. We won't try to reason why it happened. It happened and it can happen again for sillier reasons than person's religion or beliefs [INAUDIBLE].

There is another or perhaps even more equally disturbing question, and again, perhaps this is unanswerable. At the very beginning of our discussions this afternoon, when we talked about how the army had you selected and then trained for future duty on the investigation teams-- you were trained at Cumberland College, was it?

Cumberland University.

Cumberland University.

Lebanon, Tennessee.

OK. And there you were given access to a great deal of classified information as to what was going on. Did you have a sense then, based upon what you were taught and the materials to which you had access, that at least some allied governments had a fairly good idea of what was going on, as early as at least the time you were trained?

Well, the London War Crimes Commission was very much in existence then. And they were collating information from all parts of occupied Europe, very accurate information. Those pipelines were kept open.

And given these materials you saw, was it still a shock when you discovered what was going on in the camps, or was the material fairly good background for it?

Realism's always a shock.

Realism, admittedly, must have been.

Because along with the realism comes the sights, the smells. Very profound shock. Much more than seeing suddenly a photograph in front of me.

Do you think that the government of the United States deliberately withheld doing something it could have done? For example, bombing the railway tracks leading to the camps, doing other things to sabotage, or--

Without going into a tactical area, I would rather reserve comment on that. But I think we were rather good at selecting targets and bombing those targets. These are targets that we didn't select and we didn't bomb. If we had selected them and bombed them, I think there'll be good reason for it. Double talk? Right. I say, yes and no.

They should have bombed them, should not have bombed them. Should they have bombed a camp like Flossenbürg, I'd say yes. If they'd destroyed those Messerschmitts on the ground, it would have saved a hell of a lot more lives than would have been lost at Flossenbürg in the area.

So as we're winding down toward the end of our afternoon together, to conclude the interview, Mr. Wegard, is there anything that you'd like to leave us with as far as why you mentioned that you thought it could happen again? With all of our discussion, it's very difficult to assign reasons as to why it happened the first

time. But you've obviously given that quite a bit of thought. You do think it could happen again.

Can happen. I'm not picking on experience during my time on this Earth, 1917 period on forward. Let's go back into history. There's always a Caligula showing up across the horizon somewhere. Go back to the very history of man. We've had massacres and massacres, and it'll always happen unfortunately. Hopefully, never again on a scale like we witnessed in World War II. But it happened then. It can happen again.

And the groundswell, you can almost call it a groundswell, is beginning to develop. All the rudiments are there now for something like that. You keep repeating a lie, after a while, it becomes the truth. You'll keep believing it. And you've got these poison tongued speakers out there convincing quite a few people.

And they're convincing them at universities, such as this one. Not necessarily at this one, but universities, major universities, they're featured speakers at these universities. They're permitted to talk there and spew their venom. And the more they'll talk, I, for one, pick them up as personal targets. The other people I would like to be on a roster with, talk to. Find me one.

Have you ever debated anyone on this issue?

No. Informally, never formal.

Thank you very much, Mr. Wegard.

My pleasure.

Appreciate your time.

Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]