

NAME: KENNETH COTTON

INTERVIEWER:

CAMP:

DATE:

Q: We're doing Kenneth Cotton. Could you tell me your full name, please.

A: Kenneth William Cotton.

Q: And what is your address?

A: 533 Scott Street in Rippon, Wisconsin.

Q: And when were you born?

A: I was born March 27, 1922.

Q: And how old were you at the time you went into the armed services?

A: I was 20 years old.

Q: Were you drafted?

A: I was drafted.

Q: And what was your prospective profession before you went into the Army?

A: I was a repairman in a washing machine factory.

Q: And what kind of occupation do you have today?

A: I am a rural mail carrier.

Q: Which military unit did you serve with and your rank?

A: I was a technician fifth grade with the 62nd Armored Infantry Battalion of the 14th Armored Division.

Q: Just for the record, were you present at the liberation of any of the camps?

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A: I was not present at the actual liberation. I went there as a mechanic. I was at the scene after they were liberated, but not at the actual liberation.

Q: Earlier when we were talking, you described the situation that happened shortly after the war.

A: Yes.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about what happened?

A: After the war ended, our battalion was sent to [unintelligible], Germany which is on the Austrian border. Our duty was to guard a bridge over the Saale River. A short time after we got there -- and incidentally we were stationed in the town square in what was called the Opera House, but was in actuality the City Hall -- the discovery was made. I'm not sure where these bodies were discovered, but there were a number of bodies buried in a common grave that had been executed. How they were executed, I'm not sure, but they had been executed and buried in a common grave. The Army exhumed the bodies, put them on trucks, and brought them to Birkhausen to be buried. They parked the trucks in the town square and the stench was almost unbearable even with the windows closed in our building. They took these bodies, dug separate graves for each one, made everybody in the town turn out for the funeral, had services for them, and buried them individually.

Q: Were you present at the services that were conducted?

A: I wasn't present at the services that were conducted. A number of our men went to the services, but they just wanted more or less of a representative group from the Army.

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Q: You wouldn't happen to know off-hand the names of any of the men who might have attended?

A: No, I wouldn't. I'm pretty sure our officers did, but I couldn't say for sure who did attend.

Q: About how long after the war were these bodies discovered?

A: It was probably about a month or two months. It's hard to recall exactly, but it was before our outfit was broken up. They shipped a number of our people out of our division back to join the 45th Division. A number of us were left there, but I'm sure this was before they shipped the men to the 45th Division.

Q: What was your reaction? Do you think this was a good thing that they had done that?

A: The only thing I questioned was that perhaps they were punishing some people by forcing them to go to the funeral for something that they didn't have any part in and did not approve of. Nevertheless, it made an impressive ceremony to have all those people there. Certainly, a number of them were undoubtedly Nazis or followers of the Nazi political beliefs and probably approved of what had happened, but there were probably some who didn't. Probably many that didn't.

Q: Do you think what the Army did in exhuming the bodies and having this funeral was correct?

A: Yes, I think this was correct because, at least in our religious beliefs and everything, we would not approve of a common grave and we gave them some kind of a service which undoubtedly they didn't get when they were executed. At least, we buried them with a Christian

burial, which all of us desire or most of us desire, at least.

Q: Do you have any idea of what the reaction of the townspeople was?

A, The townspeople, from what we could tell, were reluctant to go, didn't like the idea, but they went without any violent protest or anything. I can understand why but they did turn out a couple of the infirm or the children. They didn't make the children go as I remember. I think it was just the adults who they made go.

Q: What was the reaction of the other men in your company or in your platoon?

A, I think that they felt much the same way as I did. It gave a tribute to these people, at least partially. Perhaps some of the German people didn't approve of it, of what happened to them either, but they still had to go to the funeral. I think that most of them felt it was justified because it was the German nation as a whole that was responsible, to a certain extent, for all these things that happened. Even though they didn't, perhaps, approve of some of these things, they tolerated it. I think in that sense that the whole German nation had to share in a sense of any guilt.

Q: It's been almost 34 years, almost to the exact mark. We're in the middle of July now. Looking back at it, when we teach children in schools about this history, how should these questions be approached?

A: I think these things shouldn't be covered up, that children should be aware of what can happen under a totalitarian rule and under the influence of a person like Adolph Hitler, and not only Adolph Hitler, but the rest of the hierarchy of the Nazi party. I think it's their duty to see that such a thing can't happen here. And with our democratic form

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of government, whether we approve of everything or anything that the President does, it still is the best way to keep something like that from happening. The President and the Congress have to respond to the wishes of the people to a certain extent because they know that eventually the people are going to rule anyhow, where in Germany, after Hitler took over, it was only a small group of people who had any say in what was done and people got to the point that there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Q: Has the event that you lived through in the Army and the things that you saw, such as this funeral in this town, affected your life in any particular way or your philosophy?

A, Not me. I don't think it has really affected my life. I think my attitude toward such things hasn't changed. It certainly has given me a better understanding of what did happen because in a lot of people's minds there are doubts about whether some of these things are being exaggerated or not. I think that in many cases the news media and various scholars have downplayed what happened and after the passage of time, they are trying to soft pedal it a little bit. But I think we should be aware of what can happen and what did happen and just to be sure that it doesn't happen again. As a matter of fact, now they are having this same problem in other countries. If it could happen in Germany at that time, it is certainly happening in these countries and there's no denying that it can happen if the people aren't responsible enough to see that it doesn't happen to begin with, that the nation doesn't get in such position that it can happen.

Q: When you say it's happening in other countries, do you have any

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particular areas in mind?

A: There are atrocities that are happening in Africa that are pretty well documented and in the Middle East. I think that there is no doubt about the things that are happening there -- the mass murders, the political executions that have taken place there. It's the same type of thing. People are killed without trial, without really any provocation, and I think it's against the American way of life. I think we have to realize that these things are happening today, perhaps not in a broader scale, but certainly shouldn't even happen on a small scale.

Q: Thinking back now, has your opinion of the German nation changed?

A, I think that right now the way the German nation [unintelligible] I think they have learned their lesson. I think that there's a strange sense of guilt among the older people about what happened and I think that they are trying to keep that from ever happening again. When we were over in Germany last year, I went back to a POW camp. They still retained some of those barracks.

Q: Which Prisoner of War camp was that?

A: That was at Moosburg.

Q: Moosburg was one of the very large prisoner camps.

A: This was near the end of the war and the Germans were retreating. They were taking the prisoners along, marching them along. They got them as far as Moosburg and they put them in a prison camp there. This camp had lots more people than it was designed for because they had brought prisoners from all these other camps into there. There's been a lot of estimates about how many there were. You hear a lot of different figures, but I think the most reliable from what I've been able

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to gather is somewhere between 120,000 and 200,000 which is supposed to be the largest number of Allied prisoners that were freed in Europe at one time.

Q: Were you present near or about the time that Moosburg was liberated?

A: Yes. I wasn't in Moosburg but we went through Moosburg the night after the town was freed. It was like going through Times Square on New Years Eve.

Q.. A lot of people milling around?

A: I think we moved about two miles an hour going through there because there were so many prisoners of every nationality imaginable. We were throwing off rations to them. There were a bunch of Algerian prisoners sitting on our half-track going down the street and they had a box of rations that they were throwing out to the prisoners.

Q: How did you feel going through Moosburg?

A: I was pretty happy to see that many prisoners freed and to think that we had had a hand in freeing them. There was a feeling of accomplishment to see that we had freed them, knowing that some of the prisoners from our own outfit were there.

Q: Had you heard prior to coming to Moosburg either about prisoner of war camps or concentration camps?

A: No, we hadn't heard about them, but I'm sure that Division Intelligence knew they were there. But there's a lot of information that doesn't get down to the line of soldiers. You're told to pursue the Germans in a certain route and that's what you do. I think it was a surprise to everybody that they freed that many prisoners, although I'm sure that the American Intelligence knew there was a prison camp

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there.

Q: Were you given any particular instructions beyond just to keep pursuing the Germans?

A, No, not our echelon, the troops that were there, because we moved right through and kept on going.

Q: The passing out of rations as you were moving through was something that was spontaneous?

A: Yes, spontaneous. We were carrying quite a number of rations that were surplus, more or less, and when we saw those guys, we couldn't tell them, "No, you can't have anything." I think we had a trailer on our half-track and we must have had about 25 or 30 pieces of rations that they couldn't carry on the kitchen truck, so we passed some of them off to some of the prisoners.

Q: How did those men look?

A: The ones that we saw looked in pretty good condition. Of course, a number of them were officers. They usually kept the officers separated from the enlisted men in prison camps and, in many instances, they did treat the officers probably a little better than the enlisted men. I didn't see anybody that looked really in bad condition, although perhaps the ones that weren't in good physical condition weren't up in the town square where we were.

Q: Did you see any people along the roads or anything that had been liberated from the concentration camps?

A, No, I didn't see any myself. We didn't get in to the concentration camps. At least, my company didn't but we did free two prison camps.

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Q: The question I would like to ask you is how the things that you saw shortly after the war, such as these people that were reinterred and the things you saw at Moosburg, affected your own faith?

A: I don't think it really made a change in my faith but it gave me faith in my own faith that somebody would see that these people got a Christian burial and they were paid the proper respect. But, actually, to affect my own faith, I couldn't say that I became affected one way or the other too much.

Q: If your child said to you that he wanted to be a Nazi, what would your reaction to him be?

A, The first reaction would be anger, probably disappointment, and then I would try to tell him some of the things that happened and I would try to reason with him and tell him things that happened from my own experience, from the experience of others that I talked to, and things that I know about the situation. I would try to impress upon him what would you do if this happened to you or your family. Do you still want to be a Nazi? Is there any way you can justify that? I guess that's about all any person can do.

Q: Is there something you would like to add in reflecting about the things you saw?

A: I think that these things are resurfacing now. The showing of the film, *Holocaust*, has brought the subject up again, and I think it should be done. Some people have the attitude "It's over. It's done with. It happened many years ago. Let's forget it." I don't think we can forget this thing any more than we can forget things like the Civil War or the way the slaves were treated at that time, which the film *Roots*

has brought emphasis to. I think we have to go back and we have to learn lessons from the past, and every so often we have to have a renewal of a lot of these subjects brought up again and emphasized so we can take a direction to keep these things from happening again. I think it is proper that they should be taught in the schools, that we should have a certain amount of emphasis on them so that we keep remembering that those things happened and that they can happen again if we aren't vigilant.

Q: You mentioned the *Holocaust* TV movie. Did you see it?

A: Parts of it. I wasn't able to see it all.

Q: What did you think about the parts that you saw?

A: It made you feel sad but it refreshed those things that happened. I remember thinking at the time that I hope a lot of young people watch this movie so they will know what happened. I know what happened and I think most of the people at that time had a pretty good education about what happened, but this upcoming generation has to realize that these things actually did happen, that they are not fairy stories, that they are not things that are exaggerated. They were really true. I know I was very interested in what I saw. I wouldn't say it was entertaining. It was educational though -- very educational. .

Q: You mentioned *the Roots* and *Holocaust* TV programs. Do you think that's an important role for TV to play?

A: I think so. I think TV can be many things. It should be involved in education. It should be both entertainment and informational. You have to have in programs some pure entertainment. There's a certain amount of time that should be for things that are educational. such as

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those two programs. They were stories, but they were certainly educational. They were factual.

Q: I'm wondering if as a result of part of those TV programs or the experiences you had your attitudes toward Blacks changed?

A: I don't think so. I've never had any prejudice against Blacks. Where I live we do not have many Blacks living in our town but I've known a lot of Blacks. I have been good friends with quite a few Blacks because I'm in a college town and as a side line I write sports for a newspaper, so I get a lot of contact with so many black athletes. They became good friends of mine and, if somebody mentions them, I have to stop and think sometimes whether they are Black or not. They are just people.

Q: How about your attitudes towards Jews?

A: I always got along fine. I worked for a Jew for about 3 or 4 years and always had good relations with him. I've known a lot of Jews and I've never had any animosity toward them. I've always felt that they were people, there's no difference. The Jew I worked for is now a multimillionaire, started out with nothing in 1939 and today is a multimillionaire. And I'm sure that if I ever wanted to, I could go down and [unintelligible] give me a job and he would do it right now because he feels loyalty to his early employees and the people he associated with when he first got started.

Q: Were you aware of any Jewish men in your unit?

A: Oh yes. We had many -- a good friend of mine.

Q: Let's say this vignette that we started out with, were their reactions any different from some of the other men in your unit?

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- A: In some instances. When you go back, look up the story in that history of Ken [unintelligible]. He was in my company.
- Q: A Jewish man?
- A: Jewish, and here was a man that was one of the most intelligent men in the Company. He was a crack radio operator, but he was [unintelligible]. He wanted to get out of the Army and he tried everything in the world to try to get out of the Army. He tried to get what was known as a Section 8, which is a mental, and they knew that he was faking and they finally transferred him into our Company. He was under guard a lot of the time doing company punishment and I'll never forget. When we got ready to go overseas, we shipped from Camp Campbell to Camp Shenks, New York on a train, and each of the FCO's was assigned a certain compartment and he got put in my compartment. Everybody was betting that he was going to jump the train because he really wanted to get out of the Army and he was afraid to go overseas. So I went to him and I said, "Look, everybody is betting you're going to jump the train. I can't watch you every minute. Are you going to jump the train or not?" He said, "Don't worry - I wouldn't do that to you. Maybe to some of the other guys I would. The First Sergeant is one. But you don't have to worry." And I never had no trouble. We got overseas and he was the best soldier in the outfit. He would do anything and because he was Jewish, he was out [unintelligible]. He said "I won't be satisfied until I see the German blood running down the hill." He ended up with the Distinguished Service Cross and would have probably gotten the Congressional Medal of Honor if he didn't have such a bad record in

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the States. I can verify that they were going to nominate him for the Congressional Medal of Honor, but they wouldn't because of his poor record in the States.

Q: Any particular incidents or just the fact that he had shaped up?

A: Yes. One of the first [unintelligible] we were in, we stopped our half-tracks outside the town. Our company moved in to the town with no resistance. Once we got in there, the Germans were hiding in the cellars and everything. But they were [unintelligible] the middle of our men. Some of the men got cut off without ammunition. They radioed back to the company headquarters that they were out of ammunition and cut off. He took 30 caliber machine gun belts and hung them around his neck -- he had the weight of machine gun belts that a normal man couldn't carry -- crawled on his hands and knees through the sniper fire to get to this company and led them back out of there. And that wasn't the only thing he did. Anytime they wanted somebody to go out on a scouting mission or go out and bring back a German prisoner he'd volunteer for it and go out and do it. And finally, one time when we were going to take a town, he was out scouting in front of our lines and he got hit in the stomach. He stood up and started shaking his fist at the Germans and shouting at them, calling them names and everything. We had medics that had to go out and pull him down and take him back. He lived but that was the last we saw of him.

Q: Do you know if he is alive today?

A, I don't know if he's alive today. Nobody's been able to find him, but he didn't get killed. They know he survived. There were a number of

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other instances. One time he went out to get a German prisoner. They told him not to bring back a prisoner. They wanted to find out what was in the town that we were going in to and he came back and he didn't have a prisoner. He said, "I had one. But I was marching him back and I forgot to take his gun away and I turned around and he shot me. The bullet went in to his gun stock so he said he had to shoot him. There's quite a story in that book [unintelligible].

Q: Thank you very much.