

This is a continuation of the USHMM Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Helmut von Schweitzer. And today is June 30, 2020. So when we finished up yesterday, I believe it was just about the point where you were taken prisoner by the US armed forces and were held in Paderborn, the same place that you had just left from two months earlier. And you described a little bit about what the atmosphere was, about the prisoners walking around on the grounds, that most of them were kind of elite types of people who had higher positions.

And I remember you mentioning this one gentleman who held his head high while all the others were kind of bowing their heads low as they walked around, and that you somehow befriended this person or came to know him.

Yes.

Let's start from there. So tell me a little bit about who he was and what your interaction with him was like.

Well, I mean, when I started to talk to him, he was very busy with a problem. He was revising one of the great Greek epics about Troy. And it was the Greek drama around Troy and that kind of--

Excuse me for a second. There was some other noise that was coming that I hear on the microphones. Is someone talking on the phone?

No, there's nobody here directly, no. I'm the only one in the room.

OK. Then maybe it's an echo through our microphones. I'm sorry. Let's continue.

Shall I speak more quietly, then?

No, no, no. You're perfectly fine. You're perfectly fine. So he was revising something from Troy. One of the--

You all right?

We're talking. No, [INAUDIBLE] checking whether we're talking all right.

Yes. OK.

Yeah. And the-- I'm sorry, all the names are not quite handy to me. But I don't think it matters too much. We were busy doing something together-- reading, writing, and working all kinds of additional changes to the original drama. And noting them and then revising them and then again discussing them. But the whole point of it, really, was that we sort of virtually forgot about the surrounding we were in and the awful situation and being hungry and all the unpleasant things.

And that went on for about a week, 10 days maybe. I'm not quite sure. And then one night, maybe sort of just before midnight, I was already on my place in my-- on the floor in the straw-- well, that little bit of straw that there was-- and some Americans came in and fetched me out, took me to the office outside the camp, the barbed wire camp. And there was a young American soldier officer sitting there to interview me.

And he said, well-- in perfectly fluent German-- he said, well, tell me your life story. So I started to tell him my life story. And then he would suddenly interject and said, hey, what do you think of Hitler? I said, greatest war criminal. And I said, carry on. So we'd carry on with my life story. And he would say, who is guilty for the war? And I said, of course, Germany.

And so then again, he told me, carry on talking. And then a third question was-- well, what was it? What did I think about what happened to the Jews? And I said that that was just the most worst terrible thing that could ever have happened. So then he said, carry on talking. And after a short while, he said, no, it's OK. You can go.

And I was taken back to my original camp. But first thing in the morning, about 6 o'clock, just after it became light, I

was fished out again. I was given my bag, my backpack, and taken to a camp just across the way from where I had just been, which, in my time, when I was there training, was the camp of the Russian prisoner of war camp.

But now it was a German prisoner of war camp. It hadn't been changed one little bit. The awful way it looked when I was there two months earlier was just the same now. Americans have just swapped the inmates. But in there, there was a different bunch of people. These were obviously ex-Army people, but again, they seemed to have been more the admin people rather than frontline, ordinary soldiers like myself. They were in reasonable shape. And a lot of them were teachers and doctors, some people like that.

And they had an immense amount of social life carrying on, social life in, if you like, the pre-Hitler time, the good old times. There was a choir. There were discussion groups, and all that kind of thing. And I really threw myself into that, although, I mean, I was a sort of the odd type, because I hadn't had any relief right from the frontline service. So I was as dirty as you can imagine-- I mean, apart from superficial washing.

My clothes-- my uniform, or whatever you might have called it-- was in rags. I was full of lice and whatever. It was crawling all over the place of me. And so I wasn't much of a companion, certainly, to people in the hut where I had been in the punishment or in the investigation camp. They really sort of shied away from me a bit.

But now, again, in this camp, there was still no improvement. And of course, it was still also the basic Russian camp. It had all the lice. In fact, it was so heavy there that often I slept rather in the open at night than staying inside, because these animals would be falling on you from the ceiling or floor, everywhere.

So the social life was strong. The choir-- I joined the choir, all the old German songs. And as I say, their various lectures going on. And there was particularly talk about obviously that there was-- what is it? The [NON-ENGLISH] was the name of the book, written by somebody-- I'm just trying to think of his name again-- written after the end of the First World War, saying that Europe-- that [NON-ENGLISH] was finished.

And now these guys was discussing and saying, now, what did it all mean? Was it now really actually-- has it now happened? Was all the Hitler-- this terrible thing, all that kind of-- so we had kind of discussions, but not so much about war guilt, but about fate, that kind of thing. And-- sorry.

Can I interrupt for a second? A few questions. So the first camp that you were in, it turns out to be an interrogation camp. Is that right?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Yeah, that's what it was.

So it's sort of like a filtration camp to find out who were true Nazis and who would have been in the higher positions?

Yeah.

Is that so?

I think that's what it was, yes.

OK. Now--

The guy who interviewed me, the American with perfect German who interviewed-- I had this sort of almost a feeling that he was born in Germany. I wondered whether he might be one of these Jewish refugees who'd come to Germany-- to America. Anyway--

You wondered-- I'm going to pause it. Stay at this moment. Actually, there were many who were. And they were involved in debriefings and interrogations and so on and so forth. When he asked you, what do you think of what

happened to the Jews? How much did you know at that time about what happened to the Jews?

Well, all I knew was that they had been taken away. I certainly-- I had no true or certain information of what happened with-- to what extent they were tortured or anything like that. There obviously had been rumors, but never any confirmation of one sort or another. And of course, really, I mean, at that time I didn't know whether Hitler was dead or alive, because-- indeed, where he committed suicide maybe three weeks before that.

So when you were taken-- I forgot our dates now a little bit-- was this at the end of April of 1945? Do you know approximately when--

It was on the 4th of May that we surrendered to the Americans.

OK. And so the war ends only a few days later. So by the time that you're interrogated, it's really around that time of the war ending, of Hitler having already committed suicide. But you don't know that. You don't know that.

No, I didn't know that. But I mean, for me personally, the most important thing was that I was out of the war now.

Of course. Of course.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--out of the war criminal camp.

Well, is that how you saw it at the time, that the first interrogation camp is those where there are war criminals or possible war criminals?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I was only in there because of my [NON-ENGLISH] membership. The whole [NON-ENGLISH] organization was automatically declared to be a criminal organization.

And had the Americans, when they took you, declared that? How do you know that it was declared a war criminal organization? Who said it?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--at the camp in Hanover, when they called us up to go on this transport to [NON-ENGLISH], they said that. They said that anybody who has been a member of the [NON-ENGLISH] is a suspect war criminal. And you must report to the-- for transport to the camp. Now, that was quite clear. I hadn't seen anything written down on paper anywhere, no.

OK. It was simply that up till now, I didn't realize there had been such communication that had taken place and that it is not you kind of seeing the kind of people who were in there in this camp that gave you that idea. It was, that's how the Americans were defining you in this--

I mean, there's a lot of us. It was on my birthday party it all happened at that time, when the announcement in the camp came. And they had to be then raided the following morning to go to come on the truck to [NON-ENGLISH], to [NON-ENGLISH].

So you had said yesterday that the Americans didn't treat you very well compared to how the British were. And did that extend to your interrogator, that kind of--

No, the interrogator was kept-- exception to the rule. I mean, he was perfectly civil. You know, it was an easy conversation, really, with him. And I have the feeling that he was my age. So apart from my garments and everything else, we were sort of similar looking. And so he was quite friendly and normal, yes.

So now let's go back to the camp that you were transferred to. And that is a more, shall we say, more like a prisoner of war type camp, but it's the Russian one with lots of lice?

Yeah, the camp-- the physical part of the camp-- was anything but a German sanctuary. But the people there had all got-- had some sort of background-- choirmaster, schoolteacher-- and they were using that to bring themselves back to normal life. And the rest of us were the audience. So there was always something going on, which again, took away the terrible living conditions otherwise.

And you know, it was nice to sing all these songs, the old songs again, and that kind of thing.

But yeah, I understand that this is how they tried to inject some sort of, I guess, normality or something positive in the surroundings. My question is much more not who they tried to go back to be, but who they were when they were caught and sent to the camp. Like, was the choirmaster also somebody who was a soldier after that and was captured by the Americans?

In other words, how was this camp defined by the captors?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I think that all of them had been, as far as I could understand from the [INAUDIBLE], they had been called up to the German army in one capacity or another. But I mean, obviously the whole German army consisted not only just of fighting units but of all kinds of occupation units in the different countries, and specialists, doctors, that kind of thing.

But again, nobody really sort of talked much about the past. That was something terrible. And now they didn't want to go into detail.

So this means when they don't-- amongst yourselves, the prisoners, you don't want to talk about the past, you're talking about the immediate past-- that is, a month ago, two months ago, stretching back maybe another 12 years, because that's the Hitler time from 1933.

Exactly.

Was your father also arrested? Because he had been part of the former--

Yes, he was. I mean, he obviously-- his work in France was-- had to stop and he had to leave. And he was then re-employed as a sort of-- as a group of similar officers to him. They were given a vehicle of some sort to make sure that the streets on the German side were in order, there was no criminals, that kind of sort of military control.

And of course, it didn't last very long, because the Americans made fairly quick headway once they got across the Rhine. And so he became, I think, for a week or two a prisoner of war. But he was then released. He was not a youngster, not dangerous looking. And a lot of people had only a very brief kind of prisoner of war experience.

So in this second camp, were there also interrogations going on?

No, nothing of the kind. So you were just being held there, that's all? You were being held there?

Held there. Well, what emerged was that we were in the British sort of occupation, that we had been taken prisoner by the Americans. And the Americans obviously had to move themselves from the British zone of occupation. And I don't know-- they certainly didn't want to take all these prisoners with them to the American zone.

And so then there was a handover to the British. And then things changed fairly rapidly. We were taken to a different camp, and where there was this camp where we had showers and we were deloused and cleaned up from top to bottom.

And we got British army gear for the complete set of British soldiers' uniforms-- except, of course, for the insignia.

Do you know where you were taken, where--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

At that time, we didn't know anything for certain, except that we weren't going to be released. That was clear. People were-- camp was dissolved and we were put on the train to Brussels.

And about when did that happen? Was that a month later, two months later--

A couple of months later. I think we got to Brussels about August 1945.

OK. And then what happens?

Now, that was, of course, then-- that was as far as you could see, there were these British army tanks. And they were all in different compartments, with barbed wire around each of them. And we were sort of dumped in one of those sections, 10 people to each tent. And the tent was already fully pre-prepared. And it was sort of dug into the ground so that up to the hip was ground. And then the tent was on top of that for 10 people.

And that was that. And then, of course, the story got around that we would be all sent to Britain for the harvest to help with the farms to do the harvest in Britain.

OK. A couple of questions at this point. Does anybody come and tell you that you are a prisoner of war, that you are going to continue to be imprisoned, that there is some sort of sentence, or that it has been determined that you belong to the group of people who was not released for any particular-- for the following reasons.

Was there any kind of official explanation.

Nothing, nothing of that sort at all. Only at that stage the communication was, you're in the camp here. And But you didn't have to line up every morning officially only for special counting occasions. And it was just a prisoner camp. No, official notices didn't exist. I mean, the British soldiers were, shall we say, less sort of past than the Americans. But they didn't have any instructions, any further instructions. When they had instructions for us, they would tell us. And that's it.

And of course they started to-- or these working parties-- nothing. Nothing [INAUDIBLE], no. Not anymore. That was before we were taken to Brussels. We had all kinds of working parties to get milk and food from Paderborn. And that's when I started to act as an interpreter with my group.

How was your English at the time?

Well, it just gradually became sort of manageable. And I remember in a particular-- my first trip with a collection party was to the-- for milk. So when we got to what we call the milk place.

The dairy farms? Do you mean--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

It was a sort of a big dairy, not a shop. And the local people, the German people working there, they were giving us cups of cream while we were doing the work. And of course, when I got back to the camp, I was so sick as never in my life.

Now, the working party that came with you, were they British soldiers who--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

There was about three British soldiers and about 20 of us, you know, that kind of comparison-- and obviously a British truck.

So the British soldiers-- I wanted to get a picture. You were there with about 20 other prisoners of war to either requisition or get items, such as the milk. But they are there to make sure you don't run away.

That's right. And then obviously they asked me to speak to the workers there exactly what they wanted. And I would tell the rest of the guys what the soldiers wanted us to do or not to do, you know. So there was a kind of conversation going on. Not much, but it was normal.

And then amongst yourselves, there was no talk of what kind of war experiences you had, or about the recent past? It was all as if it hadn't existed? Am I getting the right impression?

Yeah, it was definitely undigested-- undigested load that nobody was keen to go too deep into it.

And when you were transferred to Brussels and you were in these tents that are sort of almost like dugouts, half dugouts, because they come into to the waist, were they clean, or was it lice infested like the first place--

No, it was all clean. It was clean to get into. And I mean, it was-- you know, British kind of sense of order that we were basically left to ourselves. I mean, some people had some books with them. And I would try and get them that, as it got sort of autumn and a bit colder, we got coal for-- was in the stove in the thing you could light. But I mean, we didn't have anything to get the coal to burn. So usually then the books or anything like that, paper that had to be scrounged from somewhere, to get the fire going.

And I was fairly restless. I spent a lot of my time walking. I mean, it wasn't all that much-- and around the tents in each sort of compound. So I spent a lot of time sort of lounging around the exit or entrance to it, just to see what other people there were. And I got talking to one of the guys who [INAUDIBLE] came from the head office area, management area, and talked to him. And he said, do you know up there-- all the prisoners of war were working up there. They're all Austrians.

So I said to him, listen, I'm an Austrian. I can speak English. And he said he would tell them. And--

So he was British?

No, no. He was a soldier-- a German soldier who was a kind of messenger. So two hours later, I was fetched from my camp. And I'd taken to the guy who interviewed me was an Austrian. He was a schoolteacher from the-- high gymnasium in Linz. The gymnasium where Hitler actually did his. But of course, he was a young guy. He was sort of--

Hitler was going to, I think, establish some sort of world class museum in Linz, if my history--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

It was definitely his favorite city. There's no doubt about that.

Yeah.

Anyway, this guy was a sort of manager of the German Austrian [INAUDIBLE] workforce. In fact, my English was turned out to be rather better than most of the Austrians'. And he had one-- you know, he had managed to get Austrians into all the parts of the British camp, except for the material side.

He said there was a group of Russian and Ukrainian people who were very tough. And they sort of held out there. And they said they didn't want an interpreter. And he felt that now that he got me, I should go there and stay close to the British people there, and to these people that I was now their interpreter, which I did.

And they immediately said, for heaven's sake, go away. We don't need you. We don't want you. So I lingered around there and I found out they were-- they were Russians or definitely would be repatriated to Russian occupied territory. And they realized, to some extent, that if that happened, they might be killed or certainly be thrown into prison. So they were fairly desperate.

And I went back to my Austrian chief and said, listen, if I hang on too long, they'll kill me, because they just don't want anything-- they had a good deal with the British people there. And they certainly didn't want any intrusion from my neighborhood. So--

What was their good deal? What was their situation? And were they in a separate place from everybody else, a separate compound? Or was it just a series of tents?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

They were a separate group of people who stuck together desperately. And of course, my Austrian friend felt they were kind of an obstacle in the whole setup, which in this sense, they were. But they were a different-- disparate group of people. And they certainly had some good relations with their British counterpart. Partly maybe the British realized that they were fairly desperate and their future was particularly unsatisfactory.

Well, I mean, there has been research done in post-war DP camps in Germany, in particular, where both civilians from the East and soldiers were forcibly repatriated by the Western allies, at least in the beginning. And often, this was a desperate situation. People committed suicide rather than be transported back East. There were such reports.

But maybe you weren't involved much. But I'm getting a sense of contradictory information. Their desperate situation really would depend on what the British do, if the British allow the Soviets to repatriate them or not. And so that would put them in an insecure place. On the other hand, if they are having a good relation with the British, their captors, then they're more secure, because the captors then won't do that.

If they're in the--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--because the captors were doing it, because it was something that was arranged diplomatically between the countries that all the Russians were taken back to Russia. In a Brussels came for, instance, also when Austria became an independent-- occupied by the Allies, but then still became a separate state. All my friends were released when I had the option to say, look, I'm an Austrian. And I would have been released to Austria.

The only problem was that I knew that lower Austria, where I came from, was the Russian occupied area. And I didn't have anybody, family there or anything. Uncle Georg, yes. But I imagined they might be in prison by then. And he was. And I never had much help from him, anyway. So I felt that I had to stay German and go back to my family, be released to my family in Germany.

But I was by then interpreter in the regimental office because the guy from whom I took over, a lovely Austrian guy from Vorarlberg, a barber from-- anyway. I mean, his English knowledge or French knowledge was nil. But he was such a lovely person that he got on with everybody well.

And then when I took over in the regimental office, which was part of his, he was then only working with the post corporal. He and the post corporal were complete friends. They managed everything together. And then the other thing, of course, I became then the third of the particular-- well, the second, because there were only two prisoners, he and I. He had also made friends with the Belgian farmer whose house was in the middle of the British camp, obviously with barbed wire fence surrounding it, because all this tent camp was on his fields.

And he would go-- the British worked these strict hours. Then they would go back to their part of the camp. And obviously all our cleaning and other work had to be done either before 8 o'clock in the morning-- I think from 8:00 to

6:00 were the office hours. But after that, I mean, he and I were sort of doing the other housework.

And we started to talk to the Belgian farmer across the fence. And he was short of coal. So we would throw some coal over to him. And then occasionally we would go through the barbed wire and have a drink session with him. [INAUDIBLE]. I mean, he was also complaining. Obviously-- I don't know to what extent he got recompensed for his farm being used in the way by the camp.

But the Austrians [INAUDIBLE] all these things-- with him in particular-- all these things were possible, because once the Austrian went back and were replaced by Germans, none of these things were possible anymore. Everything was strict. You couldn't just go to the back of the sergeant's mess and ask for fish and chips. You would get it with the Austrians. And if they wanted any paper or writing gear, they would come to me. And I would give it to them from the store. How I or how they sort of justified it or accounted to the British, that was their problem. But everybody was helping everybody else as long as the Austrians were around.

But afterwards, there was nothing of that anymore. Everything was strict. Unless you had an official note that you could collect some food from the Sergeant's mess hall, from the officer's mess hall-- no go.

So was it such that people were-- when you say there were no Austrians anymore, does that mean they were released? Does that mean they--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--released. I mean, I could have been released in 1947 if I had opted to being an Austrian. But--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

As I explained to you, I didn't feel that I would have much chance in Austria in the Russian zone.

OK. So a few things that I wanted to kind of follow up on. Number one, does that mean that you were in this prisoner of war camp outside Brussels for a number of years, two years?

Not at all. As soon as it came to the spring, spring 1947, all these prisoners from-- the camp was gradually emptied out. All these 20,000, 25,000 prisoners were sent over to England and distributed basically on farm work. Yes. All over the place.

Hang on a second. You are kind of taken there in August of 1945. That's when you said you were moved to this place outside Brussels. And then the next time you're moved is in spring of 1947, which is not quite two years. It's like a year and several months.

1946, sorry. It was '46. I was only just over the winter, so to speak, we were in the Brussels camp.

OK. And then another question, while you were there and this group of Soviet Russian or Ukrainian POWs, do if they actually were repatriated? Did they stay? Or did you know what happened to them?

No, I don't, because as the different nationalities were moved out, including the Austrians, they also moved. But I was at the headquarters in the office. I couldn't run around and check everything. But by the time-- by the turn of the year, they were also occupied by some other German people.

Did you have writing privileges? That is, could you correspond with your family? What were the rules that you had to live under and what kind of conditions did you have?

Well, it was strict prisoner of war convention, Geneva Convention type thing. I can't remember. I think you had one letter a month or three letters a month, something like that, but no parcels or anything like that. Not that we could have sent any parcels, anyway. We didn't have anything like that.

Well, could you receive parcels? Could they send them to you?

No.

OK.

But I mean, at head office, I suppose we weren't really in need of parcels, either.

OK. This brings up another possible question, which is food. Were you still hungry? Or was that some--

No. We had a kind of-- the headquarters people had their own kitchen and we had our own set of food. And we had much better tents to sleep in. But we were in-- you slept in the headquarters area. And of course, as long as the Austrians were there, of course, we could go, have a meal at the back of the sergeant's mess or the officer's mess.

And explain to me then how-- what I understood was that when you become friends with somebody who is kind of like the messenger and tells you where the Austrians are, you then get transferred to the Austrians. But I didn't understand that that had anything to do with headquarters. And what was-- how did you get to be in headquarters? Rather, was it just because you were an interpreter and you spoke English? Was that what took you there, brought you there?

Well, it's because the guy reported that I was-- that here was a young Austrian who could speak English. And of course this schoolmaster from [NON-ENGLISH] no, we need him here, because I mean, quite frankly, my colleague there who then worked with the postman-- with a British post guy-- I mean, he was totally over-- I mean, the fact that--

He was overburdened. He couldn't do the job.

He was overburdened. Yeah. And he couldn't really talk to anybody. I mean, I, of course, in cleaning the commanders, the major's a Colonel, I think-- Colonel's desk, I would read all the correspondence while I'm there. And that told me straight away that everybody was going to be transported to the farm work to England, and that through these messages that existed I sent the messages to all the parts of the camp that that's what's going to happen, because it wasn't actually officially told them.

But obviously it didn't make much-- that much difference. It still happened. And nobody-- escaping, I think, was pretty impossible from that camp.

Now-- oh, I had a question on the tip of my tongue. I think I'll try to retrieve it. You are there from August of '45 to spring of '46. Here is my question.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

It was more June, I think.

OK. June of '46. So almost a year. Not quite. About 10 months. And you could have been released if you had said you were Austrian. You could have been sent home. But because you said you were German, you were still kept in the camp. Is that right?

That's right. Yeah.

And it had nothing to do-- you said you're a German citizen. So it had nothing to do with your belonging to the Waffen SS at this point that you are still a prisoner.

No. I mean, that's-- the Waffen SS thing was completely gone. I was just a German prisoner of war.

Well, this is also curious as to why would Austrians be released so much sooner than German prisoners of war?

No. I mean, that was obvious. I mean, Austria was being resurrected as quickly as feasible after the war as a separate country. And so then the Austrian prisoners of war, they're repatriated to their own country, whereas being a German prisoner of war, you were sort of part of the ultimate guilty party anyway.

And the prisoners weren't taken back. I think that there were obviously some reasons given. Being at the regimental headquarters, I could read all the British newspapers, and so on. I was in a much more knowledgeable surroundings. But it was justified that, A, the Germans were the guilty party, and B, Britain needed to recover and the British soldiers were still out there in the Far East against the Japanese. And then, yeah, that was that. The orders were made and that's where they were carried out. Except when-- I'm sorry. Can I--

Sure.

--except when all the big camp had been cleared out by the summer of 1946. The Colonel took us who were there to-- [INAUDIBLE] people. Maybe about 100, 120 people. And he said, look. I should have sent you to Britain. I said, well, that's one instruction. The only thing I can do and I will do because I think I'm grateful that you've done your good work [?so on for us?] is I'll make your sick transport to Germany.

If you're accepted as a sick transport, they'll release you. If they don't, then you might have to end up in England, as well. And that's what happens.

So what is a sick transport? And did anybody go--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Any people who had a wound or needed serious medical treatment apart from scratches and small other things were always [INAUDIBLE]. I think that's part of the Geneva Convention too, that they do not-- I mean-- and so--

Yeah?

They were the exceptions to prove the rule, if you like.

So when you had access-- this is quite privileged. I mean, that's my impression is that having access to news and newspapers is something-- did you read in those newspapers any articles about what the Allies were discovering when they were in Germany-- in other words, the concentration camps?

Of course. I mean, the papers were absolutely full of them, from the Daily Mirror to the Times. I was in charge of all the newspapers. And the British officers didn't really read much of the newspapers-- Mirror and the Daily Mail, maybe. But the Times and the more serious Observer I virtually had to myself. And I always got the papers back, of course.

So I spent a lot of the day just reading newspapers and learning English that way, because during the day, basically, I was there on call if something needed. And of course, then the-- I got on quite well with all the British soldiers. And the Sergeant, who was in charge of the telephone exchange, every now and then asked me to stand in for him when he went to the loo or something, or wanted some other thing to do. And of course, that went on quite nicely for while it lasted.

But then suddenly, I heard the voice of our commanding officer on the phone. And he said, who is that speaking? And I said, prisoner Schweitzer. Oh, and he blew up. And the Sergeant and I really got a real talk in the office, saying [GERMAN]. But otherwise nothing happened. I mean, obviously I wasn't doing that anymore after that.

So that meant you used the phone to make a personal phone call to your family or something?

No, no. Nothing at all. Somebody happened to be at the telephone exchange and make-- you know, to pass on the calls to the right officer, and so on. But the other people didn't seem to know or take any objection to my language. But the colonel certainly didn't think it was the right thing for the POW to do that kind of work.

It would be very curious. So here is the question about the newspapers. As you're reading them, are you learning things you didn't know before about what had gone on in Germany?

Yes, of course. Plenty of it. Germany was being trampled on and trampled on by all the events that actually were discovered. I mean, it was a-- well, obviously being a-- or then a kind of German, you felt really that we were the lousiest bunch of people on Earth, which perhaps would be-- to some extent we had been, anyway.

So when you read these pieces and these articles, was it that you were saying, well, this is so one sided and this is so dismissive and who knows how much of it would be true? What I do know is they hate us and we're the lousiest people on Earth. Or was it an eye opener in the sense of, ah, what I thought about Joan of Arc was actually true and much worse than I could have ever imagined? I'm trying to get a sense of how you reacted--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Definitely. I mean, quite obviously with all these news appearing in the British press, even in Hitler's Germany, was always respected to quite a degree. I mean, I certainly had no-- I mean, I realized that, in a sense, Hitler wanted to put down Soviet Russia. I mean, that was his ultimate aim.

But in the war, in all this progress-- and Soviet Russia during the '30s, of course, had avoided a terrible reputation of killing opponents and concentration camps and Siberia, all that kind of thing. And now the Germans had virtually outdone the Russians at their own game. I mean, I sort of realized that that's what happened.

The Germans may have been better people to staffers. But in wrangling around with Russia, they got worse and worse.

So was it an eye opener? When you see--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Yeah, of course it was an eye-opener. Definitely.

And did you talk about it with some of the other POWs? I mean, since you were able to read the colonel's correspondence and let them know if they're going to Britain to work on farms, was this something that you also shared? Or was this something that you kind of kept to yourself, these articles that you might see in those papers?

I certainly talked about it to the people I closely worked with, like my Austrian friend post corporal kind of person. But I didn't really have a great wide circle of prisoners in my line of work. So it wasn't a deliberate, organized effort. It was just casual conversations, yes, because obviously I had these newspapers, which nobody else had.

And did the British ever have any kind of public-- within the compounds, within the prison camp, did they ever have any newsreels that everyone had to go see? Or did they show anything like that?

No, no, no. It's nothing of the sort. I mean, later in Britain when maybe there-- not in our particular camp. But in the camp we were [INAUDIBLE] German prisoner of war camp in Greenford, where we were, to start with, which was run then by German people, first camp-- prisoner of war camp that wasn't run by the part of British but German people under supervision.

They had the sort of courses-- the educational courses in the evenings, yes. Re-education.

Well, this is exactly my question. Was it re-educational courses, or educational, which-- re-education means that you've been programmed in some way that needs to be unprogrammed. Education means something else. So what kind of courses would these have been that you were referring to? Were they political? Were they historical?

Yeah, both political and historical. And of course, because the foreign office took-- actively taking charge of re-

education, including the prisoners of war, and in particular, when I was [?in bomb?] disposal, I was in very good relationship with Doctor-- it was a German language weekly newspaper, [NON-ENGLISH], and I used to write for [NON-ENGLISH]. And Doctor-- what was his name? I'm sorry-- became quite a friend with the editor. I'll think of his name. I can look it up.

That became, for me, quite an important relationship. I used to visit him privately, as well. And he was very interested to have a prisoner of war who could review his newspapers from a prisoner of war kind of standpoint and make helpful critical remarks, that kind of thing.

This is--

But that is one--

That's when you were in Britain?

But a few months later--

OK. So let's go back now to Brussels and to June 1946. And you then are transferred to the UK. Is that right? Is that when you were moved out of Brussels?

Because as I told you, the colonel said we would be a sick transport for release to Germany. And it was then, if we were lucky, we would be released. And if we weren't so lucky, we might still end up in prison. That's all he could do for us.

And of course, so we got back to North Germany, the British zone to the [?release camp?] there and sort of, I think, early autumn '46. And the first thing they did at that camp was to have a health test, a medical test. And in those, at that time, I found out-- or we found out a sort of a complete transport of returnees was a rare exception.

But what the [? sixth ?] release camp was dealing with was sick people from Russia, from North Africa, from America, from all over the place that they were odd people, or maybe two or three together, never 120 people together. So as far as that is concerned, our arrival was a kind of most unusual event.

And of course, they immediately then gave us the medical tests. They found that we were all fit guys. And they then didn't immediately come to just the final solution to send us back or didn't have the trains or whatever it was, just maybe just the bureaucracy of the administration.

So we were in Germany, in the release camp for something like a month, six weeks before we finally then rolled off to Belgium, Antwerp, and Britain.

OK. The release camp, where was it located? And do you remember its name?

Yes, I do remember it's name, except I can't think of it now. Can I come back to it?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

It was naturally a very interesting place to be, to see-- the state of the prisoners that came back, particularly from Russia and from the French side, from North Africa, they were in a terrible state. But the guys from America, obviously, were also fit and normal, reasonably dressed--

Excuse me. Is there some background noise that I am hearing?

Yes, there is some coffee being made for me.

Sorry.

OK. All right. OK.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

OK. All right, I just wanted to know. All right. Thank you.

Sorry about that.

One more. One more. One more.

It's one short one, the cup. I think [INAUDIBLE] sounded so bad.

It is loud-- it's not so that it's so bad, but microphones are very sensitive. When they work, they pick up all kinds of noise that we wouldn't expect.

Yeah.

So are we good now? Can we continue?

Yes. It's just about finished. Yep. All done.

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Sorry about that.

That's all right. That's all right. OK, so let's continue. So you said especially guys who came back from Russia you saw what state they were in, those from North Africa--

Sorry.

OK.

Yep.

Drink it while it's warm, please.

Yeah. There are vast differences between them.

How did those look? How did they look, these veteran soldiers?

They had rags on and starved and [INAUDIBLE] in a bad way all around.

And you were then determined to be fit. And so therefore, since you're fit, not released, when do you get sent back to Antwerp? About when does this take place?

Antwerp, I think we were there about five weeks. In the meantime, as far as the postal sending letters and so on from the released campus, an almost normal kind of thing. There weren't the same restrictions. So I couldn't obviously correspond with my family very much better than at any time before.

And my father actually came up to the cabin. And we talked across the barbed wire. And he said, for heaven's sake, don't try and escape, because there's nothing for you and for us in Germany at the moment. I mean, maybe in England, you learn something, at least language. And in any case, I had no intention to escape.

And as we were traveling by train to Antwerp, obviously the train sometimes had to stop. There were British soldiers, guards around. And when some of the prisoners-- [INAUDIBLE] prisoners jumped off and the train stopped or was going through, they didn't fire or anything; just let it happen.

So if I understand that, there were prisoners who tried to escape and succeeded in doing so--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--fire on them. OK.

Yeah. I mean, I didn't mean to say they weren't picked up by the local police straight away. But you know, I saw them just jump off and wondering how they would cope with the consequences.

OK, so now you're in Antwerp and you-- do you go by ferry, by some sort of military craft to Britain?

Yes. They were actually minesweepers, British minesweepers, a British minesweeper, that had been sort of re-shaped with [INAUDIBLE] all in the body of the boat. And it had a bit of food on it. And we embarked one evening, one afternoon. And I made sure-- I didn't want to go under the deck. And I put myself in front of the main mast with my blanket. And that was my place.

I wanted, for the first time in my life, my first sea journey, I wanted to experience it. And it was quite a rough-- I mean, it took these minesweepers-- what, fairly small boats and it's a fairly windy day. And most of the people under the deck were sick, everybody. But I think [INAUDIBLE] fresh air behind them-- or in front of them. That mast that-- I didn't get seasick.

I mean, I went down sometimes to get some food. And the British people were dishing up-- were sort of in charge of having the food. They were all sick. So I just could pick what I wanted. And we arrived there some 2, 3 o'clock in the morning in-- my memory. In the Thames estuary, the first big landing place, a port of London, but short of it.

Have a sip of coffee while I look it up and see if I can find it.

Tilbury.

Tilbury. OK. Tilbury.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And so that means southern England. You were taken to southern England. And from there, where did you go? Or where were you taken, actually?

We were taken to Norfolk. But I've got to tell you a little bit of a story that-- what happened at Tilbury.

OK.

So we sort of-- 5 o'clock or what we disembarked on a little sink up to the actual deck of the-- no, not the deck. Whatever it is, the harbor proper is, where there's a sort of a train on the other side of the platform. And as we came up, there was a Tommy soldier standing there handing a proper English cup of tea to everybody as we came. And of course, we were-- most of us having been seasick and so on, a pretty rough crowd.

And as I came up and saw him, and he smiled at me as he handed me a tea cup of tea. I had the most immense feeling of joy, just indescribable. It's something I've never experienced before. And I had a similar experience later on in my life. I put it down to my mother, who was a clairvoyant kind of person. My late mother.

A medium.

A medium. Yes. So it was a totally extraordinary experience for me. And it sort of set the tone for my being in Britain.

How did you understand it? I mean--

I didn't understand it. But it was such an immense joy. It's something that I hadn't anywhere near the experience for years at that time. Totally irrational. Totally irrational. But--

And all it was is that he hands you a cup of tea and smiles?

Yeah.

So after that, you-- oh, hang on.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I took it much more as a kind of destiny, that England had to be-- well, it was something real and not just going to be a passing experience.

And that turned out to be true, didn't it?

Oh, that's very true. Yes.

So after that, you get the tea and then you-- do you go to the train that is waiting for--

Yes. We [? went ?] to a very comfortable train, not like the German trains in those days. They had all wooden seats but the proper [? posters. ?] And we went to Norfolk. And we were put into a camp that had been for the American air crews who flew their flights from that area to-- in the war. And that obviously was now surrounded by barbed wire and British soldiers guarding us.

About how many prisoners were in this particular transport?

About 150. And then I had by that time formed a little group skat group, card game skat. And so we were four or five people, really, who became sort of friends during that time. And we became later on the leadership of the bomb disposal group. But that--

Repeat that, please? The what kind of group?

The bomb disposal group.

[SNEEZING]

Sorry.

Bless you. Bless you. Now I understand. Yeah, bless you. At the skat group I was the English, basically, the English speaker and kind of interpreter. And it's sort of-- we were a group that sort of, in the end, sort of fitted the requirements to run the German camp for the bomb disposal.

So explain--

I'm jumping the gun, because obviously it didn't happen like that.

I'd like to get a sense, both chronologically of what happens, how events happen, the sequence of them. And then we'll

come to the bomb disposal question, because I didn't know there were bombs to dispose of within Britain.

Oh, yes. Definitely. So certainly we didn't know anything about that, either, at that time. You know, again, everything went alphabetically. So the A to K suddenly were called out and disappeared. I don't know whether they went to farming or what kind of job. But the L to Z were left behind for another week or so. And then we were put on a train back to London, to Liverpool Street.

And again, we didn't know where we were going to end up. But here we were at Liverpool Street. We got out-- first time in the big city. And we then put on open trucks to ride through the city.

And it was an amazing sort of experience to see all the crowds of people there, a busy, busy city. And dropped off at Paddington station. At Paddington, we were on the platform waiting for collection.

And you know, it was a fairly busy sort of platform. There was a couple of policemen standing there and there were these two guys who were guarding it. And suddenly, one of these railway workers came up to us, to our sort of standing group. And he said hello. He said, I was a prisoner of war in Germany, in the last war. And I was with a farming family and I had a very good time. I hope you will have a good time here in Britain.

And he sort of talked like that, sometimes showing that he knew a few words of German. And I sort of helped translating his English parts, to a certain extent. And you know, I was sort of a bit stunned, because at that time, prisoners were English people and prisoners were forbidden to speak to each other. And it was definitely-- but neither the police nor the soldiers made any moves. They just let it happen.

So in the end, our train arrived. And the guy said, good luck, boys, waved, and then we turned and had a quick sort of suburban trip to Greenford, was it? Anyway. Just a little bit further east where there was this German prisoner of war camp run by Germans. You could come back for seconds helpings of food, which was [?at the restaurant?].

Excuse me. I didn't quite catch that. You went to Greenwood, I think you said. And you could--

Greenford. Greenford.

And what was that, Greenford? What was that?

Well, it is a suburb at the Hoover factory [?is there?].

Uh huh.

There was a German prisoner of war camp run by Germans, not by British people. And we were there just without-- as newcomers. But we were kind of kept separate. These people were there-- they had occasional kind of jobs to do in various Army stores doing work in the Army stores. But it wasn't a regular thing. It was working parties now and then when required.

And we were just there on hold. But they had sort of obviously quite a few internal things organized, like a little library or talks, instructions and that kind of thing. I tried to help with it. I got myself in trouble with the sergeants. I mean, there was a group of sergeants who ran the camp. And they were sort of old fashioned German army kind of people. And I'd try to introduce more discussion and so on. So I got myself in trouble. And my skat friend said, for heaven's sake, keep out of this.

But then suddenly, one morning these big American five ton trucks arrived to pick us up. And then we were taken into town to Fulham. And in Fulham, there was this-- royal engineers thing on the [INAUDIBLE] polo ground, where they were at the camp. When we arrived, all their trucks were just moving out to work and we were left standing there waiting for things to happen.

And a soldier came from the office and said he wanted to speak to [INAUDIBLE]. So however, he led me then into the

office. And there was Major Gibson. And he said, you know, we want you to work here. I want to talk to your people. You will be translating for me. And we really hope that you'll be happy here. OK.

So we went outside and Major Gibson did this talk to our people, about 80 people now, I think. And he kept saying, you get your-- you're like the British soldiers. You have your free time. You obviously have to work, but only during normal working hours. And otherwise, you can go out and have your free time and spend it the way you like.

And the work is bomb disposal. So I thought, well, all these other guys in the other camp, they worked at these army stores. And that bomb disposal sounded like just moving bombs from one place to another.

But then he said, well, I'd like it-- he said, look, I want you to talk it over and to let me know whether you want to do this work. So that sounded fishy, you know. And I thought, well, you know, Geneva Convention-- so I said to him, look, I'm sorry, what actually is bomb disposal? And he said, well look, there are unexploded bombs all over the place in London from when the Germans attacked. They have to be removed-- that is to say, dug out from the ground. But only an officer could defuse some-- a trained officer.

It wouldn't mean that any prisoners of war would have to actually handle, or even touch the bomb. But it's-- some of these bombs are quite deep in the ground. So we have to have a sort of shaft. So he said I'll leave you to talk it over. And let me know. So everybody was talking now, this and that. The older people, the most senior people, sort of had-- why should we help the enemy to do all this kind of work.

And the younger people basically were happy to do something useful. So in the end, I'll sort of cut it short, I said, I'll tell the major we are happy to do our bit. Nobody objected, so I went to Major Gibson and I said, look, we are in for it. And so then he said, there's not much-- there's not much you could do today, because you know, it's already out at work. But maybe you could just clear up the yard here, because it seems a bit of a mess.

So we spent the day clearing up, finding quite a few empty houses of cases of bombs, which would all stack up to a kind of monument at the entrance, which later became a kind of standard part of our group. Anyway, so then these big trucks-- American trucks-- came at 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening, took us back to Greenford. where we were. By the time we got there-- you know the usual sort of town traffic.

So it was too late to get any food from there. And next morning, again, we are there for sandwiches up front from the kitchen to take us down back to Fulham. And then the group was sort of-- the [INAUDIBLE] will organize to-- it was basically, we are [INAUDIBLE] was roughly the same as the spot on the British squadron was there. They worked in-- under a sergeant in each case who had a truck.

So there was for every three British soldiers, there were three Germans in the new set up. They were desperate for drivers. And you know, there were quite a few among our crowd who were adding drivers, not on English soil, but so it all got quite a few engineers, which were, again, useful for building a shaft and so on.

And the whole thing got very quickly working. And it became quite successful in a short time, the extra member-- and you know, there have been a-- people obviously from the war knew often where a bomb had fallen and not exploded. Otherwise, of course, you had magnets and things like that to make sure the thing was there in the ground somewhere or not.

So that became the [INAUDIBLE] site. And you build a shaft down. There's a crane and a pump to pump the water out, wherever you take the ground in London. It gets wet very quickly. And the press was what was interested. When the pump came, it was actually-- and the area had to be cleared. It was all very formal. And then the-- commanding officer was called back to assess the situation.

So I have a number of questions here. And so I'm going to start a little chronologically and see whether or not I'm accurate. So when you go from Tilbury, you're taken to Norfolk. A through K, whoever's last name begins A through K are taken off somewhere. And L through Z is left. And then about a week later, you're taken to Green Fort, the camp-- model camp at Greenford, which is near Fulham. So we're talking about London, the outskirts of London. And the

following day, American army trucks come and take--

But it wasn't the following day. It was about two weeks later.

OK. They come and they take you to-- did I hear it correctly? A polo match place, a place where people--

There's a polo ground in the [INAUDIBLE]. Yeah, the polo ground is obviously-- it's now high rise buildings [INAUDIBLE].

OK. But it was a polo ground where the British military had some sort of either headquarters or installation--

No. Well, the royal engineers had been given that place, the polo ground, to set up their bomb disposal squadron.

OK. And that's where you meet Major Gibson, who-- it sounds so strange to hear that the captor is giving the captives an option. They can do this or they can refuse to do this. And so therefore, you weren't sure what he was talking about. And then he explained.

I wasn't sure, but I realized, obviously, afterwards that from as far as the Geneva Convention was concerned, it was something that wasn't exactly right, because the Geneva Convention made it expressively clear that Christmas must not be put into a potentially dangerous situation. Now here, dealing with unexploded bombs, never mind whether you touch something or not, it was, I think in those days, was considered a potentially dangerous job.

And he wanted-- Major Gibson wanted us to say we volunteered, not that we were forced to do that kind of work. On that ground, we sort of accepted the responsibility that we might blow ourselves up.

And did that happen to anybody? Were there accidents? Were there any accidents during the time that you were working on these bombs? I mean, there is also something of divine justice in here. If these are German bombs that were falling on Britain, then if I were British, I would say, well, you know, it's only fair that somebody who is German defuses them. And I, let's say a British citizen, doesn't have to expose myself to that danger. I mean, that's without talking about any of-- when you don't get down to the details, that argument may not be so straightforward.

But it was really-- I mean, the issue was raised. Also, I mean, when you think of it, in Britain, it was-- in London, it was a hot situation, because the press got hold of it and people-- there were always people writing in saying, in our backyard or in our factory or on the front, there is an unexploded German bomb.

Now, what would-- you do something about it. I mean, we don't feel safe sitting there underground. But when you were in Berlin, weren't you, for two years? I'm sure you would have had dozens of bombs under you there which nobody knew about. Nobody had time to look after. But it didn't become a public issue, or it never will, unless they find one now when they build a new super building on some.

And anyway, so it was a hot issue as far as publicity was concerned. But obviously, as soon as one of those bombs was uncovered and the people in the area [INAUDIBLE] moved their homes. And then the officer came and to undo the-- make the bomb safe. Then the press was there too. And it then was in The Mirror and the Daily Mail. And of course, from now on, the picture of the team that dug up the bomb was a mixed team.

There was a German prisoners and there was all the British soldiers all together. So it became quite a sort of issue-- in a positive sort of way.

OK, because I mean, it does-- it does look like it could be a good issue. And I mean, in the sense that here is a former enemy which is helping to dispose of a danger.

Right. I certainly felt that very much. And I think most of the young people did, too. And I think the older ones, as well, except they felt that they ought to have been released. They had wives and children back home and so on, and why are they being held back to dig up these bombs? But a lot of them were drivers. Being able to drive a truck was, again,

something special, not just-- so it all developed very happily and fairly well.

I mean, at Christmas we had-- I mean, we could go out and obviously we-- in Fulham [INAUDIBLE] in Fulham is fairly working class kind of area. And to have girls and contacts there, it was quite easy. The prisoners were sort of a novelty, you know, going out in the evening. And once you had a place outside the camp, you had some civilian clothes there. So you went out as a prisoner of war and you changed clothes. And then with your girl or with a family you had your spare time like a civilian.

So you know, the term prisoner sounds so different here, because prisoner sort of has this connotation that you're in a jail. And a jail, of course, is not some place that you can walk out of. Or you're in a camp. And a camp is surrounded by barbed wire, and that if you go any place, that you never go by yourself you have somebody watching you so that you don't run away. Now, it doesn't sound like any of that-- or only a little bit of that-- was the actual situation. You do have a camp. And you did have a uniform so that could identify you as a prisoner.

But you have free time. And free time doesn't mean that you are limited to just the camp area. It means that you can go and be in town. You can walk around.

Well, exactly. I mean, all the prisoners, [?were?] including myself, we just felt our way. We went out and talked to people and make corrections. At that Christmas, at that first Christmas, we had a kind of resolve to get every one of our POWs invited to family for Christmas dinner. And we just about managed it, with the new connections we've made.

But obviously, we were popular, because people, as you said, were appreciative that here were the Germans helping to get rid of these unexploded bombs. And so it was a good spirit. And altogether these early post-war years were so conciliatory, so friendly with ordinary people. I mean, full of intent once were just ordinary British people, nothing special.

Later on, when we were in Richmond park, there, to make contact with local people, that was a class problem. I mean, they were upper class people. They weren't just speaking particular to Germans, of all people. You know, it was a totally different affair. But they also needed more help gardening and so on. And so they could get jobs. They could pay extra pay or underhand pay, whatever you like it.

But most of our guys always went back to Fulham and Putney and that area because that's where they had their original contracts. But I had a--

Was there any fraternization?

What?

Was there any fraternization?

Yes, sure.

OK. So did you ever meet anybody from-- did you ever meet anybody Jewish from Germany? Some people had escaped before World War II and had found refuge in London. And did your path ever cross with them, people like that?

Well, we had once-- I mean, at first, of course, we were still at the camp in Greenford when they had to travel back and forth every day except Saturday and Sunday. And then Greenford itself, the camp was not open for going out. I mean, that you could only do from the camp in Fulham, from the royal engineer's place. So by about October or November, there was a group of our people and royal engineers, soldiers, who were so detailed to put up the extra [INAUDIBLE] huts for us to join the camp at Fulham.

And that meant that we became a separate prisoner of war camp. And the regulations were, according to the foreign office situation was that the camp leader would be elected by the other prisoners of war. We would have an election. But the Geneva Convention from, I think, after the first war-- only after first World War there was no such thing as elections

or anything like that.

And it was still a much more military kind of age. There did you read the Geneva Conventions? It's the highest ranking-- what you call it? Non-commissioned officer who will become the commander. So [INAUDIBLE]?

You're talking about the leader of the prisoners, not an official commander.

Well, a prisoner of war camp has to have a leader, a manager. Excuse me, but just to make clear that we're talking about a leader or manager from whose side, the captor or the captives? That is, the prisoners or the British? Who needed--

I mean, the whole new idea was that the German side or the German soldiers should elect that that was the War of the foreign office saying should elect the guy they think is most suitable or most desirable to be their leader. But the Geneva Convention was-- still is, I think-- that it should have been the most senior non-commissioned officer who becomes then the camp leader. That's the military approach.

So there was that kind of problem. I mean, the guys said to me when we had to actually move to-- and the question-- and I said, look, we've got to-- we must now have an election for a camp leader. They said, forget it. You're doing it. You know, I was the English speaker. And as far as we're concerned, carry on. And so that was that.

Then the war office came in and said, that's not according to the Geneva Convention. He is a mere private. We can't accept it. But then Major Gibson put his foot down and said, don't you want these bombs dug up? I mean, that guy's doing a good job. Everything's working. For heaven's sake, don't upset the process. So the war office step back, and then I was camp leader.

And then I had to, of course, organize the rest of the staff. We had to-- had our own kitchen, get our own supplies, and all these things. And so it suddenly became a-- then of course [INAUDIBLE] office in the camp with a lieutenant, who was sort of allocated to look after the prisoner of war side. But he was-- you know, he didn't like that I had my desk in his office. But most of the time he was away, anyway. So that worked out--

British lieutenant, right?

A British lieutenant, yeah. Yeah. So just Major Gibson, basically. Then there was a captain Wallace, I think, who was in charge of the British side and the technical side, and this young lieutenant who was the administration and then the Germans. But between us-- I mean, the Major Gibson only dealt with me directly. I didn't sort of say to the other one.

And in fact, he took me-- he said, look, when I go out to one of the-- to inspect these sites, would you like to come with me and I'll show you a bit of London? So he did that in his own private car. He didn't even have an official car. He wasn't a regular soldier. He was a-- call it a building--

Was he reserve?

Yeah, he was a reserve. And I think he was only a major because of his-- the position he was holding, not-- anyway. And I remember the first time he took me along. We went along the River Thames from Fulham to-- towards Westminster-- past Westminster. Then we got to the-- what's the big church?

St Paul's Cathedral?

St Paul's Cathedral. And then sort of in front of St Paul's Cathedral, he stopped. And he said, now look. Here the bomb went through the back of the church. And it was right by the main altar, right behind the main altar. It didn't explode. And we diffused it. Very proud.

So how long did this last? I'm sorry to interrupt you. But this situation that you were-- that the prisoners were defusing the bombs, that you were the leader--

No, we weren't diffusing the bombs. I mean, it will always have to be a British officer. I mean--

I meant involved in the diffusion of the bombs that--

For the rest of our prisoner of war period, which we were released in June 1948.

So it was a number of years, in other words. This was--

A couple of years, yeah.

OK.

Yes. Oh, that's Rivkeh unpacking something. Wow, that you can hear that.

[INAUDIBLE]

It was-- yeah.

I have some notes here. And I don't know whether or not these say anything to you. But a Doctor [PERSONAL NAME], a Wandsworth parish priest--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Can you tell me about these things?

Doctor [NON-ENGLISH] is a guy at the foreign office who issued the weekly [GERMAN] newspaper, and with whom I also-- we did some recordings for the BBC together. And they had-- I sort of talked to you and I was friendly with him. And his son had been to the London School of Economics and graduated there. He now was in Saudi Arabia in some oil company, busy.

And he said, well, why don't you study here? And so I went to the LCC and said, can I do [? my trick ?] here? They said yes. Why not?

OK, now excuse me. I mention these things but I am confused. Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] was the editor of the [GERMAN] post. And you mentioned [GERMAN] post before.

He was from Berlin, a Jewish guy from Berlin who escaped-- not a religious guy in any way, but an intellectual. And he and his wife were living in London. But their only son had already graduated and was in Saudi Arabia now, working.

And when did your paths cross with his? At what point?

Almost at once. I mean, we were the one prisoner of war camp which was sort of just at the back of the war office. So a lot of guys who wanted to know about the prisoner of war situation who came to the war office were taken along to this Fulham place. And I guess it was easy to get to and it looked a bit better than most other places because if you had the sort of job to a certain extent right on the spot [INAUDIBLE].

Now I'm confused again. Greenford was one kind of camp. You didn't stay there long. You were moved to Fulham. Is that correct?

No, no. That's the same thing. Fulham is-- Greenford is part of Fulham. It's just an extension of Fulham.

OK, so it's the same camp. And it is, you said, right behind the war office. That means physically across the street or behind it?

Not as much as that, but down the road. Down Fulham Road, basically, from the war office. And I mean, it's much closer than any other camp would be. And it's right in this city, so obviously it was an easy kind of place to pick. The Red Cross would come to us to see what was going on rather than go out there somewhere into the suburbs to see another camp. So we were very much in the open there.

OK. So geographically, you're in a convenient place for either war office officials or for someone like Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] to come and to visit and to get to know you. What else made the camp special, though? You give a sense that it was a-- there was something special about this camp. Was it the set up? Was it the--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--pump disposal work, of course, made it special. I mean, otherwise, obviously that here was a youngster, actually, the camp leader against-- which was strictly according to the Geneva Convention and that kind of thing.

So you get to know Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] while you are also fulfilling whatever duties you have as camp leader for this bomb disposal activity that the prisoners are involved with alongside the British officers who actually do the diffusion. I'm just trying to place it in context.

Can I sort of fill you in?

Yes, please.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--as a camp leader basically was high action early in the morning as the teams were leaving for their different sites. And again, in the evening, after they all came back. So that between 7 o'clock when they usually-- well, it's been 7 and 8, some teams. There were about 10 different teams that were working on 10 different sites somewhere in London, East London were there these bomb sites.

And so as far as my camp leader work was concerned, the daily kind of work was an enormous amount while they were going out, any kind of problems, and so on. And when they came back at 6 o'clock, any more problems or issues. But in between, of course, in particular, to begin with, our drivers-- German drivers straight in the big city traffic, you know, all the tramways still in the middle of the road, things that they weren't used to. We had quite a bit of damage occasionally with their trucks hitting-- brushing something.

And then in some cases, there was a court case. So I had to go as an interpreter at the court for this traffic issue to be dealt with. It was quite a busy time. But particularly once it settled down, basically I had plenty of spare time during the middle of the day between the morning and the afternoon.

And so I started this idea-- well, I wrote-- I mean, Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] wrote some articles. But he said, well, you know, you can do more. Why can't you-- and that to me seemed a wonderful idea. So I entered from a trick.

Now-- excuse me. When he says you can do more, what did that mean?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Educate myself.

Ah. OK. So continue a formal education of some kind?

Yeah. Again the London County Council had no objection to treat [INAUDIBLE] as a German prisoner of war wanted to sit in their exams. I mean, they would give me the-- if I passed, they would give me their certificate, which they did. But then they-- Doctor [PERSONAL NAME] said, if some went to the London School of Economics, and they were-- that was good quite a good international high school. It was still on a separate University then. It was part of the London

University College. Why don't you apply for that?

So hoping that I would get my matric. I applied to the LLC, and sure enough, they said, you can sit for the examination. But we expect you to be in civilian clothes, just the same as the London County Council said, you can come to the exam, but not as a prisoner of war, as a civilian.

By that time I had also my outside position. And--

What does that mean, outside position?

Well, my English friends, civilian friends, who could-- then I had my civilian suit and would change and then go to these exams. You know, that's--

It's just unusual to hear that a prisoner of war could attend University while he is--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I was amazed. But of course, I jumped at it, at the opportunity. And--

Another question. OK, say what you wanted to say, then I have another question.

I don't know what I wanted to say. [INAUDIBLE] question then.

Sorry. Sorry about that. So Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] sounds like somewhat of a mentor, not just--

Yeah. Sure.

And did you get to know him? Did he get to know you?

Yes. I mean, as I say, we met socially. I came to his flat during the weekend and that kind of thing. And this is, as I said, we did some recordings together for the BBC at-- so but he had a biography that was so different. And when you say he was someone who was Jewish who is an intellectual who had escaped Berlin, did he ever share his biography with you? Did he ever tell you--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

He never seriously did. And I never asked him, either. I mean, he just escaped from Berlin. But that that's all I knew in time before the Nazis became impossible.

OK. Was he the-- I mean, were there other Jewish people or other German Jews that you met living in London, or was he, let's say, the first--

Oh, yes. I mean, there was, of course, the parson who came from once was-- he was the parson-- the parish parsons in Wandsworth And he came and he said he would like to give us. And he was an ex judge from Saxony, Jewish guy. And from Saxony. And Chief Justice or high court justice from Saxony that-- we tried it, but our guys weren't-- I mean, he was too formal and official as a-- talking to our people about the religion. They didn't cotton on. So it faded out.

But I got very friendly with her in particular. I mean, they were a lonely couple and you know, that [INAUDIBLE].

So they had converted? They had converted to Christianity?

Yeah. I don't know whether they were ever-- ever had been, shall we say, had proper Jewish beliefs. They may have been-- I mean, he obviously was a highly educated German individual. And a lot of these people don't practice religion seriously any more.

I don't-- no. Again, it was one of those sensitive topics that you don't sort of question too much about.

So that means that--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

He was a Church of England chaplain there. And I mean, how he got there, I don't know.

OK. So a question that I think would be acceptable today to ask him how do you go from being a secular Jewish person who holds a judicial position as a high judge in Saxony to being a parish priest in Wandsworth of Church of England, I mean that does-- there is a transformation. And it's one that we could talk about today, but was not polite to bring up then. Is that the issue?

I mean, as far as I'm concerned, it was something marvelous, how he could have managed that. I didn't have the impression that he was really very happy with it. And that was part of the problem, I think, when he gave-- he wanted to give these two instructions or services to fellow prisoners of war. You know, he was too-- I don't know, too cold.

Maybe he was legalistic about it.

He was legalistic about it. And that was the last thing that they could really sort of accept.

Did you, amongst any of this when you become a prisoner of war, from the very beginning to, let's say, this point, did you ever encounter anti-Semitism within your fellow prisoners of war, meaning did you ever hear them say things that were derogatory, things that echoed the Nazi party line, even if they may not have been exactly Nazis, et cetera?

I think there was always a sort of background of that, yes, which was so typical of the German situation. I know a strange situation, too, that a kind of something, you know.

Was it expressed or not expressed?

By and large, it wasn't expressed. But you know, I grew up with that kind of situation. And I knew it. Maybe I've felt it a bit more. And I was trying to do something about it, particularly after I read all the newspaper stories in the Belgian camp, you know. I felt that there was something to do about it, not just to sort of say, oh well, yes.

How did that take expression for you?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

It was a kind of feeling, an undercurrent that I was looking for-- I mean, for instance, the fact that I had a good contact with Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] and also Doctor-- the priest, the parish priest. That made me sort of honored that I would have-- that I could, in some way, respond positively to this gap.

And to my upbringing, which was fundamentally anti-Semitic.

Is that hard to say?

What?

Is that hard to say, that my upbringing was fundamentally anti-Semitic?

Well, it was and it wasn't. I mean, it's typically-- I mean, [? Baby ?] [? Schmidt, ?] for instance, who was a great friend of the family, who everybody knew about. The family knew that she was Jewish, made no difference at all. She was totally accepted. The guy with the egg buyer with his caftan and his thing wasn't accepted. And of course, he treated

that, as well, in the process.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--didn't have any-- I mean, that had its-- he shouted at him and chased him away. He didn't actually search him or do anything or send him to police or anything like that. But he was obviously upset that the guy had so easily conned him.

Were you referring to the incident when you're still a little boy in [PLACE NAME] and it is an issue of the gentleman wanting to buy eggs and he doesn't have enough money for all of them and didn't let your father know? But this is way back, way back we're talking about?

It is way back, yeah. But I mean, it was one of those kind of situations. I mean, he may well have had all the money. But he just said, nobody knows. But that didn't accept it his words, so to speak, and was upset about it the way it was said.

OK. Do you remember the name of the parish priest in Wandsworth who had been once the judge in Saxony?

Yes. I'm sorry.

Maybe it will come to you later. Maybe it will come to you later.

It wasn't a very Jewish name. I know it was-- it ended with H-O-N. It was something Robinson-- not Robinson, but something similar.

OK. So his desire to preach or to provide services was not very well accepted amongst the other prisoners.

It just didn't get any sufficient attendance to his meeting. So we just sort of faded out.

OK. But we had some-- can I interrupt for a moment?

Of course.

Thank you.

Of course.

Just a minute.

Sure.