

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM LEVINE

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1:00 Intro.

2:00 Dachau concentration camp was opened on March 10, 1933, shortly after Nazis came to power. It was the first camp to be operated and organized by S.S.; it served as a model for other camps to be run by the S.S. Concentration camp personnel and commandants were trained at Dachau. It was the first camp in which the order was given to shoot anyone approaching the barbed wire enclosure around the camp. It was also the first camp where the so-called medical experiments were conducted,

3:00 Many thousands of prisoners were maimed, tortured and killed. It is thought that 40,000 human beings perished at Dachau, and at the liberation, there were an estimated 32,000 prisoners there. Interviewee: Major General William Levine born in 1915, in Duluth, Minnesota. I was enlisted as a private in 1942, at Ft. Snelling, Minn.

4:00 I was commissioned in 1943, after attending officer candidate school, in the artillery. I went overseas in England, and came on the continent at Normandy. Went through the normal track of the combat forces through the northern tier of Europe--France, Belgium, Holland. I was part of the 3rd army and then the 9th army, then 7th army.

5:00 Later in tour in Germany that I joined the 7th army, and moved east along southern tier through Stuttgart, Dachau, Munich, so forth. Many of us were aware of the existence of the camps, and we had been given info. that the conditions were less than to be desired, and that the treatment of the prisoners was almost inhuman. There's no possible way of any of us visualizing with any degree of accuracy the impact of having actually entered a concentration camp.

6:00 The condition of the prisoners was such a shock, was so beyond belief, it was indescribable. It was in 1945 that Dachau was entered for the first time by allied forces. Before entering camp, it was an innocent kind of thing--you don't see anything. Train tracks moving in direction of camp, boxcars stationed on tracks.

7:00 This train had just arrived, and there were bodies of those who had been transported along side the track, where they had been deserted by guards as they became aware of the approach of the allied forces. There were bodies inside the cars. It was a horrible sight, because a combat person is normally acclimated to combat, to destruction, death, and maiming. But not the kind of death you see under these conditions--the emaciated bodies, the behavior, the possibility of food available.

8:00 There were people expiring from the exhaustion of the excitement. Very difficult thing to recall. There were the austere barracks. Not very clean, the method of keeping the area clean was very crude. The discipline in the last few weeks almost ceased to exist. Some of the prisoners who were well enough tried to locate some of the guards who had run off into the woods,

9:00 ...with the idea of venting their spleen on them, beating them to death. They were not happy that we tried to prevent that. We did find some guards; they were turned over to our P.W. people. Our interest at that point was to determine what had transpired within the camps by interrogating the prisoners. We also interrogated the citizens of the town Dachau.

10:00 The interrogation began immediately (within several days).. The prisoners had to be sorted--those who needed medical attention, and most of them did. Malnutrition was main cause of their condition, which was horrible.

11:00 Great number of cases of typhus. Survival rate very low. Even when they ate the food we gave them, they got sick from it, because they couldn't handle the volume of food--it was too good for them in a sense. They were not acclimated to it. I had contact with the prisoners immediately, but it was not on a person to person basis. It was more asking what they would need, how they felt, whether they could walk,

12:00 ... so we could group them according to their needs, so we could handle it more efficiently. Food was their primary interest. Many of them too sick to vocalize their needs. We gave them medical attention immediately, but had to pay attention to amount of food given to them, so it wouldn't be too much for them to handle,

13:00 Many of them passed away almost immediately. They might have passed on anyway whether we were there or not. Some of them just couldn't handle the excitement--the level of excitement was not to be believed. Although there had been some rumors that we were approaching.

The realization of our being there was even greater than the anticipation of our coming. Some of them I'm sure thought that they would never be liberated. Another indication of their despair.

14:00 It's very difficult to speak of this...We went to the wooded area where prisoners were taken late in the evening in the winter--clothed or unclothed--they were sprayed with water and left all night.

15:00 So that hopefully when the guards would come back in the morning there would not be many left to take back to the work details. A method of cutting down the population of the prisoners. I cannot believe people can do this to each other, regardless of whatever side of any fence they might be on. I do not think it is conceivable for people. It was easier for me to forget. It was too hard to realize that people could do this.

16:00 You're trained in combat, acclimated to destruction, to killing soldiers--you are trying to seize land and if you must kill people in the uniform of the enemy in the process, it is necessary. Somehow I could handle that, but this was not combat. This was absolutely different. You'd have to be an animal. How civilians could do this to civilians.

17:00 Dachau was activated in 1933 by Hitler and originally designed to hold political prisoners, and a few criminals. But it became little by little, slowly, more than a place to incarcerate prisoners. The SS administered and operated the facility. They were already trained to do things we would find reprehensible.

18:00 When you have a large number of people...8,000 originally to be housed, but there were 60,000 at some times, and 30,000 at liberation (I thought there were more). This created an acceptance. This overcrowding plus lack of food, lack of space and the fear that they would not survive...

19:00 plus the physical labor, plus the disappearance and the witnessing of people disappearing and not returning--you begin to do things to others that you would never do, that you would have found reprehensible normally. Even the prisoners began to lose their humanity, because of fear and hunger.

20:00 The SS never had humanity of course. The replacement SS late in '45 were no longer the hard core, firm SS, although they still had to follow rules handed to them. I'm not sure if I can get across the transition from human to animal behavior that takes place in the camps. Fear of death will do horrible things to people.

21:00 In the group psychology routine, people become capable of animal behavior. The numbers of people encourages a psychosis. They felt like they were hiding in numbers, not singled out. I would rather not talk about the gas chambers. I cannot handle it...

22:00 When we arrived, the concentration camps in the north like Auschwitz began to ship out prisoners. With the advance of the forces, there was a reduction of populations and there was an evacuation of prisoners to the center of Dachau. That's why I thought 33,000 at liberation to be a small number.

23:00 Many from France, Poland. There were many Jews, many from other camps. We were trying to find out how they were being handled, their tasks, the medical treatment,

24:00 the surgical mutilations, the exterminations to reduce populations, the awareness of the populations of the towns around the camp. Many people could not help but know.

25:00 The trains passed right by their homes. A travelling-man who lived on Nevilstrasse, where the train tracks entered the camp, he knew what was going on. His business relied on the existence of the camp. The SS lived in the town of Dachau, so prisoners were afraid to say anything, that they would end up in Dachau.

26:00 One labor-man was obstinate in refusing to do anything to support the running of the camp--He thought it was absolutely wrong. This was corroborated by three other people I interrogated. I find it difficult to accept that they were free because they did not know what was going on. They do know what's going on, but they have their own fears, so they feign ignorance of what transpired, they disclaim any knowledge.

27:00 Some civilians were brought into the camp, they claimed to have been horrified, but there is no way of knowing what they did and did not know. They saw the trainloads of people, they saw the work details in the fields around the camp.

28:00 They smelled the horrible stench of the sealed trains which were finally opened in the camp. They were aware of much more than they would admit.

29:00 It's horrible that people can do these things to themselves, to other prisoners from the stress of fear for survival. They were doing things to fellow prisoners. There was what we might call hospital facilities, but they were very crude.

30:00 The medical experiment facilities could be considered a hospital area. The callousness of the administrators and the ~~papos~~ prisoners called upon to lead among the inmates, was difficult to understand. The educated aspired to positions of leadership, they knew better. They were reduced to animal behavior,

31:00 They were not leader in the interests of the prisoners, but for their own survival. This made me ill that these wonderful people could be forced to do these things. I did not interview any German medical personnel. I did not interview any SS, there weren't enough to go around. We remained in the area several weeks.

32:00 In late '45 I moved into an occupied zone near Stuttgart, where I filled a supply function. I did not have any contact with former prisoners because I wanted to forget. It was difficult to recall what I witnessed, certainly not as a prisoner would, but nevertheless, I was selfish. I made no attempt to reach out in that direction.

33:00 The other Americans' reaction was the same, although I do not know if they wished to forget as I did. They were aghast. There were not many Jews with us, and I found others' horror reassuring. We spoke of what had happened. The interrogations were not for army newspapers.

34:00 The interrogations were for the historical army records. I returned to U.S. in July 1946. I never discussed what had happened, not even with my wife.

35:00 I was asked to speak at a highschool about my experiences in WWII. I accepted, and asked the specifics. He mentioned the desire for me to speak of the contact I had had with the concentrations camps. I was shocked, I had not even anticipated that I would be asked that.

36:00 I felt trapped. I told him I wasn't sure if I could handle it. I never thought about it for 38 years. The day came. It was very difficult. I couldn't handle them asking questions, I had to quit half way through.

37:00 The young people need to learn about it from an eye-witness, or it might be just a story. We need to ensure that it will not happen again. This made me stop wanting to forget.

38:00 That's why I'm here today. We all must do everything we can to tell the world what happened there. So people will know it is a fact. My comfort is not as important.

39:00 I attended a world assembly in Israel this past October. Set up by Menachem Begin for 40th anniversary of Warsaw Uprising. I was asked to speak for the liberating forces.

40:00 The assembly was an event to honor the liberators of camps, the survivors, the resistance, the partisans. After my talk, a man rushed up to me, put his arms around me, "Gen., don't you remember me? You saved my life, you carried me in your arms at Dachau."

41:00 I do remember carrying prisoners. I did not remember him specifically. They were all grey, like death masks, hollow eyes. He sent me a picture of the two of us. His name was Maurice Pioro.

42:00 He sent me a list of all Jews brought from Belgium to the concentration camps. It was important for them to talk to one another, because no one else could understand. This communication, exchange of horror was necessary for their survival.

43:00 It was moving for the liberators to speak with survivors from Treblinka, Auschwitz, Dachau. People from all over the world went to Jerusalem. We must reinforce anything that could be done to prevent this happening again.

44:00 Each time I talk of them, the weight of holding it in for so long is much lighter. I cannot provide you with questions to enlist answers willingly. I cannot volunteer, it is too difficult.

45:00 It does not relate to combat at all. It seems like I would be equipped to handle it, but any person would find it impossible to handle, the magnitude of it is frightening. I am trying to alibi for my behavior.

46:00 (Questioner: the genie has been released from the bottle, says Elie Wiesel.) You can't erase it. The ~~Yagvashem~~, I appreciate it more every year.

Yad Vashem

47:00 Each year it becomes more important, because the hurt, the pain begins to become clouded over. This is the horrible part of it all.