

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with William Levine
March 25, 1991
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PREFACE

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WILLIAM LEVINE

March 25, 1991

Q. What is your date of birth and place of birth?

A. I was born in 1915 in Duluth, Minnesota. I entered the army and enlisted as a private in 1942 at Fort Snelling, Minnesota which is between Minneapolis and St. Paul. I was commissioned in 1943, after going to officer candidate school, in the artillery. I went overseas to England and followed normal tract of combat forces though France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. I was part of the third, the ninth and later the seventh army in Germany in which I moved east along the Southern tier-through Stuttgart, Dachau Munich . . .

Q. Before you entered Dachau, had you heard of the camps?

A. Many of us were aware of the existence of the concentration camps and we had been given information that the conditions in the camps were less than desirable and the treatment of the prisoners was almost inhuman. However, there was no possible way of any of us visualizing with any degree of accuracy the impact of having actually come upon and entering a concentration camp. The condition of the physical facility, the condition of the prisoners was such a shock that it was indescribable, just not to be believed.

Q. You entered on April the 29th?

A. Yes, when Dachau was entered for the first time by the American forces on April 29, 1945.

Q. Do you recall your first impression upon entering the camp?

A. At first, before we entered it was a very innocent kind of thing, you don't see anything except there was a railroad track moving in the direction of the camp with the boxcars stationed on the tracks. This train had just arrived and there were still bodies of the people transported along side of the track that had been deserted by the guards on the approach of the military forces and there were some bodies in the cars. It's rather a horrible sight because normally a combat person would be acclimated to combat destruction, death, maiming, but not the kind of death that you see under these conditions. The emaciated bodies, the behavior when the possibility of food is available, and there were people that were expiring from the exhaustion of the excitement. It is a very difficult thing to recall.

Q. You entered the camp, as far as physical nature of the camp, what did you see in terms of buildings?

A. The buildings were regular barracks, very austere, not very clean. The method of keeping the area clean was very crude. The discipline the last week prior to our arrival almost ceased to exist. Some of the prisoners that were well enough moved into the woods to try to locate some of the guards who had run off with the idea of trying to beat them to death and they were unhappy that we prevented them from doing that.

Q. Did you see any guards, were there any left in the camp?

A. Yes, we found some and they were turned over to our PW people. The primary area of our interest was to determine what had actually transpired in the camp by interrogating the prisoners and also the citizens of the town of Dachau.

Q. So as an intelligence officer at that time, this was

06:06 your duty to interrogate? How long after the liberation did that interrogation begin?

A. It began almost immediately.

Q. It started with the prisoners?

A. Absolutely, the prisoners had to be sorted by those who needed medical attention, most of them did. By almost immediately, I mean within several days the interrogation began.

Q. The physical condition of most of the prisoners you saw was, would you say, malnourished, near death?

A. Malnutrition was the primary cause of the condition, it was just horrible. There was disease, typhus, there was a great number of cases and the survival rate was very low. When people ate the food we gave them many got sick, they couldn't handle the volume. It was too good for them in a sense, they weren't acclimated to it.

06:79 Q. Did you speak to any of the prisoners right after you came into the camp, any contact immediately?

A. Yes but it wasn't on a person to person basis. It was a question of asking what they needed, how they felt, could they walk so we could separate them and isolate them in terms of their needs so we could handle them more efficiently.

Q. What were some of the general responses to the questions of what they needed and wanted?

A. Food was their primary area of interest. Many were too sick to be definitive to what they needed and we gave these people immediate medical attention. We tried to feed them very carefully so they wouldn't be overcome physically by the food they couldn't handle.

Q. As you mentioned before, some of those died soon after the liberation?

A. Yes, some might have passed away whether we were there or not. Some couldn't handle the excitement. The level of excitement was not to be believed. Although there had been rumors that we were approaching, the guards were aware that we were approaching, but the realization of

our being there was greater than the anticipation of our arrival. Some of them felt that they would never be liberated, I suppose, and that perhaps another indication of their despair.

Q. In looking around the camp in terms of buildings what else did you see, what did you notice?

A. It is very difficult to speak of this. We even went to an area where people were taken just outside the camp in a wooded area late in the evening, in the winter. They were asked to remove their clothes and they were sprayed with water and left there all night. There were times when they did not have to remove their clothes but were still sprayed with water. So that hopefully when the guard came back in the morning, there would not be too many people to bring back into the camp to put them on work details. This was one of the methods of reducing the population of the installation. It's just not to be believed that people can do this to other people regardless of what side of any kind of fence they might be on. I don't think it's conceivable for so many people to understand that this actually happened. I found it very difficult to accept, in fact it was much easier for me to forget what I saw than to remember it. It was more comfortable for me because it was just a horrible thing to think that people could do this to others. Somehow, being in combat we're trained to seize ground and in the process if necessary to shoot another person. Somehow I can handle that, but this is not combat that we're talking about, this is absolutely different, inconceivable, that a civilian can do this to another. You have to be some kind of animal to do that.

Q. So once you started interrogating, one of the things on your mind was how could this have happened? Why was this done? Did you ever receive any kind of response to that?

A. It's difficult to define, Dachau was activated in 1933 by Hitler and initially designed to hold political prisoners and a few criminals. Little by little it became more than a place to incarcerate prisoners. It developed slowly. The SS were called upon to administer and to operate the facility. They were already trained to do many things we would find reprehensible and difficult to accept. The camp was designed to hold 8,000 people but at times there were as many as 60,000. 30,000 were there at the time of liberation, still a far greater number than you would expect to find in a camp designed for so fewer people. The mere fact that they were overcrowded causes a kind of discomfort among the guards and the prisoners, not enough room coupled with inadequate space, add to the inadequate food, add to that the problem, the fear that they may not survive it here by sickness, by malnutrition, or by lack of food, by overcrowding, by lack of sleep and rest. In the meantime they were called upon to do physical labor. Add the disappearance and never returning, when you have witnessed people being called away and not returning. There is a fear that begins to be built up. You begin to do things that you normally would never do, they would be reprehensible to you but you'll do them to others. Fear and hunger were the two main reasons people began to lose their humanity, the prisoners did. The administrators never had any upon arrival that's why they were given this job. Only the replacement SS, in early 1945 were not the hard core SS. They were not quite as firm and hard but they had to follow rules. I'm not sure whether I'm able to get across that transition from normal human beings to animal behavior of one to the other in a concentration camp. The fear of death, fear of dying, fear of not being able to survive will do many horrible things to people. In the group psychology you're not alone,

you're almost reinforced in what you are doing by the numbers that do it with you. Whether it is hiding behind someone, blending in as not to be noticed, whatever, it is part of the psychology that occurs in concentration camps 1195 of this type.

Q. In addition to malnourishment and overwork, there was also a gas chamber-did you see the chamber there?

A. Yes, but I'd rather not talk about that, I can't handle that.

Q. Once you started interrogating the prisoners, were there many different of nationalities?

A. At the time we arrived, the camps in the north were overrun and prior to that there was an attempt to reduce the population and ship the prisoners elsewhere. One of the destinations was Dachau. 30,000 seems to be a low estimate of the number of people there. Many were from France, Poland, and the other camps. There was a great number of Jews there that came from the other camps.

Q. Did you have a series of questions that you asked them? What were you trying to find out?

A. We were trying to find out how they were handled and what tasks they were called upon to do, how they were treated medically if they were ill. The methods of extermination were learned. It was an effort to determine what had happened. Many people couldn't help but know what was going on. The trains with the people passed right by their homes. One man, a traveling man lived on Nebelstrasse (ph) the street on which the track that ran right into the camp was. He knew what was going on and yet he did nothing. When asked why he indicated that his business was based on the existence of the camp. For his livelihood he was afraid to do or say anything. Some of the SS lived in town, Abdachau (ph), the neighbors were afraid to say or do anything for fear that they would end up in the camp. One particular man, a union man, when asked to support the camp he refused, said "I will not." He was obstinate in his refusal and felt that the camp was absolutely wrong. The attitude of the population is very difficult to accept, that they're free because they don't know what's happening but they do know, but they had their own fears to deal with. That is why they disclaimed any information on what was going on in the camp.

Q. Did you see any German civilians brought into the camp to view the camp, to do any labor?

A. I do know that some were brought in the camp. They were horrified according to their accounts. I'm not sure how much they knew, they may never had been inside the camps but they saw the cars going in and out, they saw the transports of the work forces in the factories and fields in and around Dachau. They were not ignorant of the condition of the people, the train loads of people, the stench of the cars, it cannot be escaped. The cars were sealed and opened for the first time in Dachau. The people knew more than they were willing 1501 to admit.

Q. In terms of interrogating the prisoners, what were some of the conclusions drawn from the interrogation?

A. It is difficult to understand how people could do these things to each other, horrible, under the stress of fear, fear of death and survival is a difficult thing to handle.

Q. One of the questions asked of the prisoners pertained to a hospital facility in the camp, was there one?

A. There was a place where the prisoners were taken care of in a crude fashion. Experiments took place. The callousness of the guards and the prisoners picked to be leaders of the barracks, the Kapos, is difficult to understand. People that were educated were reduced to animal behavior, you knew that they knew better. They aspired to advance their position and had no concern for the welfare of the prisoners. Their survival only. It made me ill that these wonderful people were reduced to such behavior.

Q. Were there any German medical personnel that you talked to? Any SS?

A. No, there weren't many left.

Q. How long were you in the Dachau area?

A. For several weeks, only until late 1945. After that I moved to a zone of occupation by Stuttgart to take over a supply function.

Q. At that time did you have contact with former concentration camp survivors?

A. No, nor did I seek it. I found it hard, I was selfish, trying to forget what I had gone through, I made no attempt to reach out.

Q. The other interrogators in your unit, did they have the same reaction as you did?

A. I'm not sure if they wanted to forget as completely as I did. There were many Jews in the unit and they felt a horror that was reassuring to me. They must have felt the same way I did.

Q. So you talked among yourselves?

A. Yes, while we were there, absolutely.

Q. The stories of the camps came out in later months in the army newspapers?

A. No, this was for the historical records. You'll find the accounts, I don't know if they're classified but they're there, I saw them written.

Q. When did you return back to the states?

A. In 1946, in July.

Q. When you returned, you did not talk about this?

A. No, I never even discussed it with my wife, not until a year ago.

Q. Why just now do you feel you need to talk?

A. This past year I was asked by Dr. Albert Poll (ph) to talk to high school students about my World War II experiences in Europe. I accepted and about a couple of weeks prior to the date I asked him specifically what he wanted me to dwell on. He mentioned the Holocaust and the concentration camps. I was rather shocked. I hadn't anticipated touching on that subject. I felt I had to keep my commitment. I told him that I wasn't sure if I could handle it as well as I would like not having thought about it for 38 years. The day came I delivered my talk and it was very difficult. The next day I was asked to make a reference on the same subject to a smaller group who would ask questions. I found I couldn't handle that. I broke off half way through. I began to realize that young people needed to know about something and could only learn it from an eyewitness of the event or else it would be just a story they heard from someone third hand. It's not an adequate job. To understand what happened and to do all they could to see that it didn't happen again. To give indications to the road back to the Holocaust. This forced me to cease continuing to forget such an important matter. We all must do everything we can to tell the world what happened so that it is accepted as a fact. So they can recognize the road back to such a horrible thing and to block it ever happening again. My comfort is not as important as that matter.

Q. Did you have occasion later on to encounter any Of the prisoners you came in contact in Dachau?

A. I attended a world assembly in Israel this past October. The event was suggested by Menachem Begin to commemorate and remember the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. On the first day, I was asked to say a few words on behalf of the uniformed Allied forces, the liberators of the camps. The world assembly honored the liberators, the survivors the partisans and the resisters of to the Nazis. After the talks a man rushed up to me and put his arms around me and said "General, don't you remember me?" I said I didn't and he said, "You saved my life. You carried me in your arms at Dachau." I do remember carrying people, no one specifically. They all looked the same, like a death mask, deep hollow eyes, all alike, all gray. He was beside himself, he sent me a picture of us together, I will never forget him, Maurice Pioro. He gave me a book with a list of the Jews taken from Belgium and sent to concentration camps. The assembly was very moving. To see so many survivors together, it was reassuring, important to them to be able to talk to one another. It is essential for their survival.

Q. Did you speak to the other liberators there?

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A. Yes, all had moving experiences. Talking to people from all the camps from all over the world, it was reinforcing.