

Our interview today is being conducted as part of a joint project by the Holocaust Memorial Foundation of Illinois and Loyola University of Chicago. In this project, a number of GIs who were either liberators of concentration camps or who visited the camps shortly after the liberation will be interviewed. The larger purpose of the project is to fulfill the injunction-- tell it to your children, and your children should tell it to their children, and their children to another generation so that the horrors of the Holocaust will not be forgotten and that perhaps a similar tragedy may be prevented from happening in the future.

Our interviewee today is Mr. Manfred Steinfeld, and I thank you very much for coming. And we will be discussing the Wobbelin concentration camp. We'd just like to say a few words about Wobbelin. Wobbelin was opened very late in the war, in February 1945, as an administrative subcamp of the larger concentration camp Neuengamme.

Wobbelin is located some 20 miles from Schwerin in Germany and some five miles from a town called Ludwigslust. Wobbelin had only male prisoners. And when it was liberated on May the 5th, 1945, some 2,500 prisoners were found alive. In the surrounding forests, however, the Americans uncovered some 800 bodies that had been hurriedly buried. And within the camp itself, there were hundreds of other bodies.

Lieutenant General James Gavin visited Wobbelin shortly after its liberation. Gavin wrote, "we were told that at one time the camp had 4,000 inmates, but Wobbelin wasn't a concentration camp in the sense that they had gas chambers or various devices, not a death camp specifically. They had their own sophisticated way of killing, of getting rid of these people. They just starved them to death. We were uniformly very depressed, and angered, and saddened by this whole thing. It was-- it's beyond human experience."

I would just like to ask you a few preliminary questions for the record. First of all, your date and place of birth.

I was born April 29, 1924, in Germany.

And then what year did you come to this country?

1938.

What was the year then-- you were drafted into the army?

Joined the service in 1943.

And your serial number?

36737899.

And then also the unit that you were with at the time of liberation and your rank.

I was a member of a military intelligence specialist unit, order battle team number 16, attached to the 82nd Airborne throughout the entire Normandy, Holland, Central Europe Campaign.

So that you landed on the continent on June the 6th, 1944.

Participated in the Normandy invasion, the invasion at Nijmegen, and was with the 82nd Airborne until we occupied Berlin in July of '45.

Where was your unit stationed just previous to your encountering Wobbelin?

The unit actually at that particular time, the first week of May 1945, everything was very fluid. The Germans were advancing en masse, and I believe, on the morning of May 5, I was a member of the reconnaissance patrol that made the contact with the Russians at Grabow.

There were two contacts made with the Russians, one at Torgau. About 150 miles further south, which had taken place on May 3 or may 4, and on May 5, the 82nd Airborne linked up with the Russians at the town called Grabow, again about 10 miles or 15 miles east of Ludwigslust.

And this was quite close to the Elbe, then.

No, we had crossed the Elbe on--

You crossed the Elbe.

--on April 29. We were at that time attached to the 2nd British army. And we're the only American unit that actually ended up in that part of Germany. This was actually very close to the Baltic coast. Schwerin is a Baltic port. It's approximately-- if you were to take a straight line between Berlin and Hamburg, you would be two thirds of the way to Hamburg.

Mm-hmm.

Dissecting that line, you end up at the Baltic coast to the northeast in the town of Schwerin.

How was it that your unit was attached to the British army?

Well, being-- the airborne units were more or less fluid units. During the Normandy campaign, we were part of the American army. During the Holland campaign, we were part of the British army. We were part of the 18th Airborne Corps attached to the 2nd British army.

Then we became part of the 15th Army Group holding the west bank of the Rhine near Cologne. Approximately, I would say on April 25 or thereabouts maybe April 23, we were alerted, and we were reassigned again to the second British army in a town called Bleckede, B-L-E-C-K-E-D, West of the Elbe River.

The 82nd Airborne at that time, the reconnaissance unit, crossed the Elbe River and really encountered the final resistance of World War II, because the resistance had stopped. And the Germans were surrendering en masse. We then proceeded to-- we were in Bleckede and Ludwigslust, really. I wish we had a map here, which we don't. I'm doing this from recall.

On the morning of the 4th or the 5th, we contacted the Russians. And I remember very distinctly when we came back to Ludwigslust, I was involved in translating the unconditional surrender document which was being executed by the German commander who had contacted General Gavin, a general by the name of Tippelskirch, who commanded the 21st German Army Group, and he signed a surrender on behalf of all the German troops that surrendered to the 82nd Airborne at that particular time.

Mm-hmm.

I believe the same day we had found out, we had heard in the morning about this concentration camp with a mountain of bodies. And I think it was liberated by 10 o'clock in the morning. I first heard about--

That day, May the 5th.

On that May-- I mean, that day, May the 5th. And I remember going out there about 2:30-ish, 3 o'clock that afternoon. And it's very difficult to describe-- I mean, today, almost 40 years later, the sights that you encountered at that particular moment.

The camp was an ordinary Wittenbergs camp. The guard towers had been deserted. Everything was open. There was barbed wire. Of course, the first barrack we went into, there we found some-- among the living we found many, many

bodies. There were just some-- some of the bodies that were being removed by the medics. Just moving them, they died.

We-- I don't recall the exact details, but we received very substantial support from the medical units from the 2nd British army headquarters because they had had substantial experience, because I believe a week previously Bergen-Belsen was liberated, which was not too far to the-- which was probably only about 50 miles to the east-- no, to the west, to the west.

We were the one unit that ended up the furthest to the east in Germany, because there were no troops further east than we were.

Mm-hmm.

And this was to the west, I mean, Bergen-Belsen. And we received very substantial medical support in order to salvage and save whatever lives that could be saved.

Had you heard about the concentration camps. So it had received a substantial amount of publicity in Stars and Stripes. We did not expect to be the ones that liberated-- to be liberating a concentration camp, but we were aware. But when you've-- I mean, being aware and being-- and seeing it is totally different. You cannot believe, really, the horror and the degradation of human life the way it existed.

What-- when you came to the camp, there was no longer any German resistance.

No, all the German guards had taken off.

They had fled.

They had all fled.

So that only the inmates--

Yes, only the inmates.

Do you recall your first impressions of the camp? What struck you when you just came there?

I mean, just the horrors. And I mean-- I mean, the conditions in the wooden barracks with wooden bunks, three, four, five people in the bunk, some dead, some alive, people crowded on the floor in the corner, some dead, some alive.

These were about generally the conditions, I mean, as we found them. The people hadn't had any substantial food probably for the past month, I would say. Just sheer starvation. And that was the method of exterminating most of the ones that were-- I mean, they were inmate at that particular camp.

And the inmates were of all varying nationalities.

All nationalities. I remember talking to some Hungarians. I remember talking to some people from Poland, French, and Russians, and so on. All nationalities.

What stories did they tell you about the camp? Do you recall anything in particular?

At this particular stage, I don't-- I don't really recall except the horrors. I was just more concerned to make them comfortable.

Of course, their attitude towards the troops was--

We were the liberators.

Liberators.

Thank god, we just got there a bit too late.

So they were-- and how long did you remain in the camp?

I went in that camp-- that camp was pretty much cleaned out within about-- of all the death and the living-- within about 24 hours. At that time, General Gavin decided that we would have a public funeral. I was in charge of going to the local Bürgermeister, since I spoke German fluently.

The mayor of Ludwigslust.

Yes, to get a labor force to help clean up the camp and help move the dead bodies and wrap them in sheets, whatever was available. And then we arranged a funeral for those bodies that we discovered, I think, for approximately 200 of them, that we arranged a funeral for right in the town square in front of the castle.

Now, in the feudal days, Mecklenburg, Schwerin, was one of the feudal duchies of Germany. And the castle in Mecklenburg, Schwerin, the headquarters of the duke, was in Ludwigslust. And there's this huge, enormous beautiful castle, and with a park directly to the south of it. And in the park, adjacent to the square in front of the castle, we've decided to bury those bodies that were able-- that we found.

I was also in charge of making arrangements. All the Germans in the town had to walk through there. Of course, the Germans all in total said, well, we knew nothing what happened. We knew it was a labor camp, but they all pleaded innocence. They had their suspicions, but no one is going to admit that they knew, that they knew what was going on.

Were they made-- the civilian German population, were they made to attend the funeral?

Yes, they were made to tend to feel.

And what was their reaction?

We did not know, uniformly. That's the excuse everybody gave in Germany at that time. There weren't any Nazis in Germany in 1945.

[LAUGHS] So they denied.

They denied any--

They denied all knowledge at all.

Yes.

Did you have occasion to speak to any military personnel or anyone who had been the charge of the camp?

No. All those in charge of the camp had fled.

Had fled.

Because they of course, knew there would be potential war crimes that-- I mean, war criminals. They would be arrested. They had all taken off probably in civilian clothes and pretending that they knew nothing about it, and they just all disappeared.

Mm-hmm. Just getting back to the camp itself for a moment, other than the barracks for the prisoners, what other

buildings did you find in the camp?

I-- really, at this stage, I cannot recall all the buildings. I think there were basically barracks and the guard towers. And as far as kitchen, I really don't recall. I'm sure there was one for first aid and medication, but it was really no different than any other barracks. It was just basically all wooden barracks.

Mm-hmm.

It was not a large camp. It was-- when you-- the total population was approximated at its peak 3,000 with an average of 300 per barrack. That's only 10 barracks. That was the size. It was 10 or 12 barracks. That was it.

Do you recall the reaction of other GIs upon seeing the camp?

They were all horrified at just the degradation of human life, where humanity had subjugated someone else to a subhuman level was just unacceptable to us. But that's exactly what had taken place in that particular camp.

And did there-- did that reaction manifest itself in anger against the German population?

Well, the only incidents that I can tell you when some of the guys saw some of the-- they may not have been inmates. We found a number of displaced persons wearing concentration camp uniforms, and they recognized a particular German who may have been a guard or someone else, and they just-- we did permit them to beat up occasionally, I mean, their previous captors.

Mm-hmm.

We just closed our eyes to that, but that was just one or two instances, I mean, that we noticed.

At the funeral for the prisoners, there were probably several chaplains, several army chaplains who officiated.

Yes.

Do you recall anything that they said or anything that General Gavin said? He was there also.

Yes, General Gavin was there. The one who made-- the eulogy was conducted by Chaplain Wood, who was the 82nd Airborne Division chaplain. I don't remember the remarks that he made, but let the world never forget what we're witnessing here today et cetera. I mean, the same typical eulogy that was in order at that particular time.

After you remained in that vicinity for a while, and then you were assigned elsewhere?

I was assigned again as part of the 82nd Airborne area of responsibility to the military government office in Boizenburg an der Elbe. Which is a town about, I would say, 25 miles west of Ludwigslust by the name of Boizenburg. And I was in charge of--

I and two other-- one officer and the master sergeant, we became in charge of the military government office for that particular town. Had quite an experience that took place at that particular time about, I would say, May 20, May 15, about that time. I don't know whether it's appropriate at this particular instance to mention it, but we were walking down the street when a woman in concentration camp dress walked down the street and came up to me and said, Mr. Officer, the man walking on the other side of the street is a criminal.

And she spoke German. I was able to understand German. The other two men I was with did not. And she identified herself that she had been a previous concentration camp inmate, and that she recognized the man in civilian clothes as being Ludwig Ramdohr, who had been the concentration camp commander of Ravensbrück-- Ravensbrück.

And she had been inmate at Ravensbrück for a considerable length of time. And she had survived. And based on her

information, we followed the man, and we arrested him. And he did not deny whom he was-- I mean who he was because we had positive identification.

Of course, the typical excuse was-- what he said, the orders that I obeyed and so on. We received from him a complete-- we interrogated him, and we had a fairly substantial confession based on the responsibility that he had and based on some of the tragedies that took place in the camp. We at that time-- we left that particular part of Germany about June 15 to go back to France where the unit was being reassigned to.

And we turned him over to the British military tribunal in Hamburg. Approximately four years, later Ludwig Ramdohr was hanged by the British authorities for the war crimes that he submitted. The woman who came up to us to identify him was Margaret Buber, the wife of Martin Buber, who was a famous German philosopher who had gone to Palestine, to Israel in 1930-- probably 1933 or '34.

She had been married to Heinz Neumann, who was the communistic leader of Germany.

This was Buber's sister.

Buber's sister was the wife of Heinz Neumann, who was the communistic leader of Germany before Hitler. They fled to the Soviet Union in 1933 when Hitler came to power. And in 1935, he was sent to the-- he was sent to Spain to fight with the loyalists in Spain.

When the loyalists were defeated by Franco, he found his way back into Russia. He was promptly put on trial with a number of others as being traitors to the cause, and he was executed. She was then sentenced to-- I don't for how long-- to Siberian labor concentration camp by the Russians in Siberia.

In 1939, she was repatriated during the time of the German-Russian non-aggression pact to Germany. And she went from a Siberian labor camp to a German concentration camp, but she survived.

In other words, from '34 to '39 in Siberia, from '39 to '45 in a German camp.

Incredible.

And she survived. I arranged for her to go to the American territory, because all the territory that we vacated became Russian occupation territory. Because the Russians had east of the Elbe. Of course, the Russians would like nothing better than get their hands back on her and back to Siberia.

In fact, I contacted Professor Buber. Her two daughters lived in Jerusalem at the time. I had a brother of mine living in Jerusalem to whom I wrote to notify Professor Buber that his sister had survived. And that's the last I heard of her.

She did write a book on the two dictators by Margaret Buber, which was published by 1950.

That's an amazing story. In all your interrogation of a wrongdoer, there was never any admission of criminality on his part, no feeling of remorse?

Everything-- no, none.

Nothing?

He did admit to things that took place, the medical experiments on women. Ravensbrück was a notorious camp where many of the medical experiments were taking place basically with women.

Mm-hmm.

And it was very difficult to deny it. Of course, the typical excuse was that we only followed orders. It's--

Mm-hmm. So just no--

No particular remorse.

No particular remorse at all. When you returned to this country-- well, when actually were you shipped back to the United States.

I came back. We became-- the 82nd Airborne moved into Berlin in July of '45. I was with the 82nd Airborne until I was ready for discharge. I left Germany October the 25th '45 and was discharged October the 29th.

During those last months in Germany, did you have occasion to speak with any camp survivors or with any German civilians or military personnel from the camps?

My responsibility in Berlin when I was stationed there was really finding those who were expected to be living in Berlin who were under automatic arrest category. I became part of our counter-intelligence unit, and we arrested many, many Germans.

Those-- we had several categories, automatic or less category. We had fairly good intelligence, and we knew who we were looking for. And we arrested-- I don't remember any names, but several hundred potential criminals, or-- I mean those who were--

The potential Nazi war criminals.

Yes.

Did you interrogate any of them?

Yes, a number of them.

And the uniform response was no admission of guilt.

No admission of guilt. I would say occasionally you find someone said, yes, we were wrong. But uniformly, you would find, we only followed orders. I was only a soldier. I was a member of the party. We followed orders.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And we just had to carry out what was whatever was told us, and that was all. Those few that did admit to some wrong, do you recall any particulars there?

I don't really recall any today.

But they were very few and far between.

Very few.

And as far as German civilians that you ran across, the typical--

Yes, well, I went back to my hometown where I was born as an American soldier in, well, the beginning of June of '45. Since my mother and sister did not leave Germany when I left, and they perished in a concentration camp, we were able to determine that they died really during the last three or four months of the war, the beginning of '45.

Which camp?

Well, the last that we knew about, we were able to determine a first cousin of mine who was with my mother and sister also was with them until about December '44 in a camp called Stutthof, S-T-U-T-T-H-O-F, which is near Danzig.

And she was then shipped to Bergen-Belsen. And I presume that most of them perished during the cold and during the winter. The Russians were advancing, and they were evacuating them, and they were just dying en masse.

They managed, though, to survive until almost the very end.

Yes. They were deported in beginning of '42 to Lithuania. And I would say that from probably the end of '43 on, they were in a concentration camp, in various concentration camp. And I mean, at the end-- I mean, they were in the camp Stutthof.

When you came here, did they try to get out at the same time?

Yes, but they tried to, but it was very difficult. My mother was a widow, three small children. And she was able to get me out. I lived with an aunt of mine here in Chicago.

But the rest the other children were--

And a brother of mine went on youth Aliyah to, I mean, to Palestine.

In--

1938.

So he was saved.

Well, he died in 1945 fighting the British.

Fighting--

Against the British.

Oh, against the British in Palestine. Oh, my. What did you find when you returned to your town? This was in Hesse.

This was in the province of Hesse. It was a small agricultural town. Of course, they had many, many casualties. I would say that I don't know the exact figure, but out of a population of 400 people, I've heard at least 25% were in the army. And those near-- those who were in the army, probably 30 or 40 perished on the Russian front, and many of them were killed.

But these were more or less small towns in Germany. Although they were Nazis, they were really not aware in the overall scope of what was happening. Because they were basically an agricultural community, they were not really aware of what was happening on the plot scale, I mean, throughout the rest of Europe.

Did you meet acquaintances, people that you had known before?

Yes, yes.

Non-Jews?

Non-Jews.

What was their reaction?

They were happy to see me back.



[LAUGHS] Hmm. And they-- in terms of the atrocities and the camps and so on?

They could not believe it. And I would say, really, that in many small communities of Europe, particularly Germany, people they were really not aware of what was happening on the much larger scale.

They perhaps had some vague awareness.

But you also have to keep in mind, if in 1944 or '45 in Germany, these people had no cars. There may have been one radio in town. We didn't have transistor radios. They were more or less fairly primitive conditions.

And they would get a newspaper probably once or twice a week from the next largest city, which would be either Frankfurt or Kassel. And they were really not being-- I mean, they were not informed, really.

They were Nazis. They belonged to the party. And they were anti-Jews. And they were-- and they were anti-Semitic, no question about it, because it was part of the policy.

One of the things that took place in Germany that through the rise of Hitler, it went down to the lowest level of German society. Every town from the Hitler Youth on, they became-- it became part of the entire German psychology.

Mm-hmm.

But it is difficult to really realize how unless someone from the immediate family would be a guard in a concentration camp, or would be-- would have been assigned to it, they would not have any knowledge of it.

And there was no-- there was no camp in the area, in that particular area.

No, not in that particular--

How did you feel going back to the town at that point?

Well, mixed emotions. The first thing I was going to look for was someone who would normally-- we lived in the small town, and every Saturday morning, we would go to next town for services. We had to go by several homes between the two towns. And every Saturday morning, we would go by, they would let the dogs loose to start chasing us.

And my first inclination was, if he's there, I'm going to shoot the SOB. Well, he had been killed in World War II, so there could have been-- I mean, a nicer fate couldn't happen to a nicer person, you see.

So but I've been back there. In fact, the cemetery where my father, grandfather, and great grandfather buried is in fairly good shape. I'm almost amazed. Maybe that explains the German psychology.

In the middle of Frankfurt, there's an old Jewish cemetery. It was not desecrated any more than any German cemetery. The only thing that was done to it, all the metal and glass headstones were removed. But any stone out of stone, any memorial stone out of stone or marble was left intact.

So here in the middle of Frankfurt, the cemetery was in pretty good shape in 1945. Since my grandmother was buried there, I went there. And I was amazed in the good shape it was. Maybe that explains their psychology-- lots of respect for the dead and no respect for the living.

[LAUGHS]

At least in those days.

You found no Jews that were in your town.

No, no, no.

How many had--

It was--

How many had lived there before?

There were six Jewish families when I left. An additional one, two, three-- three families emigrated. One emigrated through the Argentine to the United States. The ones who were killed were my mother and sister.

Another family, the husband, wife, and one daughter, and then one spinster woman, about 50, 55 years old. They're the ones who were killed. They perished.

And you have visited the town since?

Yes, yes.

And it is still-- there are--

Today, of course, the towns in Germany are going through the same changes that happen anywhere else in the world. Instead of being farmers, they work in factories. And the small town was 400, the population in 1938. The population now may only be 250. That's because most people have moved to the next largest city.

They all have-- today, they have television sets, Mercedes. Where they had a cow to pull the plow, today they have tractors-- Modernization.

And do you still know people there? You still have--

I am going there probably in September to have a monument put in the cemetery in my mother's and sister's memory.

Oh. That's very nice.

Which I have been meaning to do for a long time. I finally made arrangements to do it.

And there's been cooperation on the part of the town authorities for this? No problem?

Yes, yes.

When you returned to this country, did you discuss what you had seen in the concentration camp with anyone else?

You also have to keep in mind, in 1945, the newspapers were full of it. Every newspaper, Life magazine, Time magazine, Newsweek magazine, they were just filled with the atrocities that had taken place in World War II-- the atrocities from Birkenau and Auschwitz, and I mean, all of them.

And it really-- we went through an initial stage of being informed. Then I would say about the '48, '49, after Nuremberg trials, it really died down for about 10 or 15 years. It's just a good thing that, again, today, the permanent records are being made, so people should never forget what happened.

So you feel that in terms of what you're doing now, as far as giving testimony, that the purpose for that is--

Should have been done in '45, when you had much clearer recollections of everything that had taken place.

Do you think that most GIs would have been willing to talk then?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No question about it.

And by way of a summary question, what sort of lessons, what sort of meaning can be derived, do you think, out of what you saw, out of your family's experiences, out of the tragedy of the Holocaust?

Well, that's very difficult to explain. Shall we forgive and forget? Or shall we forgive and never forget? Or shall we always look for the best in humanity? I have always taken the philosophy that just because these horrible things happen, there is still much good in most people.

But a situation such as the Holocaust can really only happen when you take a certain segment of humanity and create an environment of subhuman environment. So people are really relegated to subhuman status, and then you're willing to accept that someone is inferior, and there's a reason for it.

So I think, really, the lesson that we have to learn, that we can never permit any segment of society to be really delegated or to be persecuted to that particular subhuman environment. And I think it needs constant-- it needs constant-- constant awareness.

When you take a look and see what's happened in Cambodia and Vietnam and other parts of the world, I mean, basically again it comes down that these people became expendable. But then again, life is cheap, you know. Especially when you fight for survival, and people very quickly forget to look in the best in people.

And I am sure there are stories where people have survived by means of-- by persecuting others, by taking advantage of them. And it's just survival is very important.

Just by way kind of an aside, something that occurred to me that might be of interest, in terms of your youth in Germany and your experiences with anti-Semitism there, do you recall when it was, where it was that you first experienced anti-Semitism?

Well, I recall very vividly, and I was only at that time nine years old, when the day Hitler came to power. Because a doctor came from a town about 15 kilometers away from where we were living to take care of my grandmother. And he had been a member of the Nazi party.

And he said something wonderful has happened. I mean, Hitler is our new chancellor. It really-- the first signs of antisemitism started probably during the first boycott of Jewish stores.

Just right after that, with the assumption of power.

Which started, I would say, either middle of '33, '34, and then it accelerated in '35. I attended the German public schools until 1938 till the week before-- the week before I left for this country. From that point on, you could no longer attend any German school.

But I had finished primary school and I left at that particular time. My brother who was two years younger, could not attend school, so we had a Jewish teacher come from a town about 10 kilometers away. But he went to work in a training farm to prepare himself for life in-- for a life in Palestine.

Mm-hmm.

And in school, while you were in school and especially after Hitler's assumption of power there was a good deal of anti-Semitism or?

Not really. The antisemitism didn't really start until the-- probably '35 or '36, when a new teacher was brought into the town. The old teacher was transferred or retired, and a new teacher who had been totally indoctrinated in Nazi philosophy, I mean, took his position in that particular town.

And then he made things hard for the Jewish children.

No, he didn't make it hard. But you were made fun of, and the typical remarks, and you being singled out, et cetera, et cetera.

Mm-hmm. So you had-- certainly by 1938, your family had the feeling--

Oh, yes.

--that they wanted to get out of Germany.

Yes, yes.

That life was becoming untenable.

Yes, 1937 we first tried, but I left in '38.

Mm-hmm. Yes. Well, I'm really happy that the monument will be erected there. I think that'll really be a nice memorial. Yeah. Well, thank you very much for sharing your experiences and your insights and for all your time. And--

OK. Thanks very much.

Thank you.

We're all set?