

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Manfred Steinfeld
December, 1989
RG-50.031*0070**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Manfred Steinfeld, conducted in December 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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MANFRED STEINFELD

December 1989

A: Wobbelin Concentration Camp was opened by the Germans late in the war, in February, 1945. It was an administration sub camp of a larger camp called Neuengamme Camp. This was about 20 miles from the town of Schwerin and about 5 miles from Ludwigslust in Germany. Wobbelin had only male prisoners. It was liberated May 5, 1945. And when liberated, only 2,500 prisoners were found alive. The American Army uncovered 800 bodies in the surrounding forest hastily buried, and hundreds of other bodies in the camp itself. Lt. General James Gavin (US ARMY) visited the camp soon after liberation. We were told that at one time the camp had 4,000 inmates. But it wasn't a concentration camp. Not a death. General Gavin said, "We were uniformly very depressed and saddened by this whole thing. It was...it is beyond human experience." Manfred Steinfeld (the speaker here) was born on April 29, 1924 in Germany. He came to the U.S. in 1938. I was drafted into the U.S. service in 1943. My serial number in the U.S. Army was 36737899. I was with Military Intelligence Specialist Unit attached to the 82nd Airborne through the entire Normandy Invasion, Holland, and Central European Campaigns, until we occupied Berlin in July 1945. I landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944, during the invasion, I was also in the invasion at Nijmegen (Netherlands). I was with order (unsure of word) battle team No. 16. We were attached to the 82nd Airborne until we occupied Berlin in 1945. Our unit was fluid at that time, first week of May, 1945. The Germans were surrendering in masse. There were two contacts made with the Russians. First at Torgau. Then at Grabow. We had crossed the Elbe River on April 29. We were at that time attached to the Second British Army. And we were the only Army unit ending up so far east. We were close to the Baltic. We were two-thirds on the way to Hamburg.

Q: How were you attached to the British Army?

A: The airborne units were fluid units. During Normandy we were part of the American Army. During the Holland Campaign the 19th Airborne Corp. was attached to the British Army. Then we were part of the 15th Army Group holding the West Bank of the Rhine near Cologne. Then on April 25, or 23, we were reassigned again to the Second British Army. We proceeded to a town called Bleckede near Ludwigslust. I am doing this from recall. (Manfred speaking) The 82nd Airborne linked up with the Russians at a town called Grabow. On April 25 or thereabouts, maybe April 23, we were reassigned to Second British Army in a town called Lukleshullse (ph). We had crossed the Alps on April 29th. We were in the town of Schwerin. This was close to the Baltic Coast. Schwerin is a Baltic port. If you drew a straight line on a map between Berlin and Hamburg, we were two-thirds of the way to Hamburg. On the morning of the 4th or 5th, we contacted the Russians. I remember distinctly when we came back to Ludwigslust. I was involved in translating the unconditional surrender document which was being executed by General Gavin. (I spoke German.) The German Commander of the 21st German Army Crew, Tipilkirch (ph) had contacted General Gavin and surrendered to him for all the German troops surrendering to the 82nd at the time. The 82nd crossed the Elbe River and really encountered the final resistance of World War II because resistance had stopped. The Germans were surrendering en masse. We proceeded tp...between cities of Blacked or Ludwigslust. I believe the same day we heard about 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon. It is difficult

to describe the sights that I encountered at the moment. It is almost 40 years later now. The camp was an ordinary working barracks camp. The guard house had been deserted. There was barbed wire. But everything was open. The Germans had left. The first barracks we went into we found among the living many bodies. Some of the bodies were being removed by the medics. And by just moving them, they died. We received very substantial support from the medical units from the Second British Army HQ. They had substantial experience because I believe just a week earlier they had liberated Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was not too far. Only about 50 miles to the west. We were the one unit that wound up furthest east in Germany. No troops further east that we were. Bergen-Belsen was to the west We received substantial medical support to salvage whatever lives could be saved.

Q: Had you heard of the concentration camps?

A: Yes. They had received publicity in Stars and Stripes but we did not expect to be the ones to liberate one. But reading about it and liberating it are two different things. You cannot believe really the horror of seeing the degradation of human life that existed. Among the living we found many bodies. Just moving them, they died. When we came to the camp the Germans no longer resisted. All the German guards had taken off.

Q: What struck you? What was your first impression?

A: Just the horrors. The conditions in the working barracks. Three, four, five people in one bunk, some dead, some alive. People crowded onto the floor in a corner, some dead, some alive. As we found them. People had not had substantial food for probably the past month. Just sheer starvation. That was the method of extermination in this particular camp. There were all nationalities. I remember talking to Hungarians, Polish, French, Russians and so on.

Q: Any stories from camp inmates?

A: At this stage I don't recall anything except the horrors. We were only concerned to make them comfortable.

Q: What was their attitude toward you?

A: We were the liberators. Thank God. If only we had come sooner. The camp was pretty much cleaned up by 2:45 hours. All of the dead and the living. At that time General Gavin decided to have a public funeral. I was in charge of talking to the Burgemeister (mayor) of Ludwigslust, since I spoke German perfectly. We had to get laborers to remove the dead bodies, wrap them in sheets or whatever was available. And clean up the camp. We arranged for a funeral for about 2000 bodies. Right in the town square, right in front of the castle. City of Mecklenburg Schwerin. It was one of the feudal duchies of Germany. It was the Headquarters for the Duke. The headquarters was in this beautiful castle. Huge, enormous castle. Adjacent to the square, in front of this beautiful castle, we held the funeral. Of course, all the Germans said they knew nothing. It was only a labor camp. They all pleaded innocent. They had suspicions,

but no one admitted they knew what was going on. The civilian population was made to attend the funeral. There weren't any Nazis in Germany in 1945. (Manfred jokes.) They denied all knowledge.

Q: Did you speak to military personnel? Anyone in charge of the camp?

A: No. All those in charge of the camp fled. They knew they would be prosecuted as war criminals. So they took off, probably in civilian clothes pretending they knew nothing about it. They just disappeared.

Q: Getting back to the camp itself. Other than the barracks for the prisoners, what other buildings did you find?

A: At this stage I don't recall. The basic barracks, the guard towers. As far as the kitchen... I am sure there was something for first aid, medications, but basically it was all wooden barracks. It was not a large camp. It's total population at its peak was 3,000. Average 300 per barracks. Ten to twelve barracks. That was it.

Q: What was the response of other GIs?

A: All GIs manifest this feeling against German citizens?

A: The only incidents I can tell you about was that some of the GIs, when they saw some of the inmates or displaced persons we found wearing camp uniforms, or they recognized a German who was a guard, we let them beat up occasionally a German captain in one or two instances. We closed our eyes to it. At the funeral there were probably several army chaplains who officiated.

Q: Did any say anything say anything special?

A: The one who made the eulogy was Captain Wood of the 82 Airborne Division Chaplain. I don't remember all the remarks he made. They were typical of that time. "Let the world never forget what we are witnessing here today." We remained in that vicinity awhile. Then I was assigned as part of the 82nd Airborne to military Office of Boizenburg on the Elbe. Town about 25 miles west of Ludwigslust. I was in charge and two others. One officer and a master argent. We were the military government of the town. About May 20, or May 15. We were walking down the street when a women in a concentration camp dress came up to me and said, "Mr. Officer, the man walking on the other side of the street is a criminal." She identified herself that she had been a concentration camp inmate. I understood German. The others didn't. The man was Ludwig Lamdor (ph). He had been the concentration camp administrator at Ravensbrück and survived. Based on her information, we followed and arrested him. He did not deny who he was because we had positive identification. He gave the usual excuse. "I had orders." We interrogated him. We had a fairly substantial confession based on the responsibility he had. Based on some atrocities that took place in the camp. We left that part of Germany about June

15. We went back to France. Our unit was being reassigned. We turned him over to the British Military Tribunal in Hamburg. Approximately four years later he was hung by British authorities for war crimes. The woman was the sister of Martin Buber, the famous German philosopher who had gone to Palestine in 1934. She had been married to Heinz Neuman (ph) who was the communist leader of Germany before Hitler. This woman and her husband had fled to Soviet Union in 1933 when Hitler came to power. In 1935 her husband was sent to fight with the Loyalists in Spain. When the Loyalists were defeated by Franco, he found his way back to Russia, put on trail as a traitor and executed. She was then sentenced to Siberia labor camp by the Russians. In 1939 she was repatriated during the German/Russian non-aggression pact. She went from a Russian labor camp to a German concentration camp. But she survived. I arranged for her to go to the American territory because all the territory we vacated was Russian territory, and they would have liked to get their hands on her and sent her back to Siberia. Later I heard she wrote a book about being under tow dictators in 1950. Her name was Margaret Buber. Ravensbrück was Notorious. He did admit to medical experimentation that took place in Ravensbrück, basically with women. it was difficult to deny it, based on the atrocities, but he said he was only following orders. He showed no remorse at all.

Q: When did you return to this country?

A: I was sent on leave to Berlin in July, 1945. I was with the 82nd Airborne. I left Germany...discharged on October 29th.

Q: During those last months in Germany did you speak with camp survivors?

A: In Berlin when I was stationed there we were finding those expected to be living in Berlin who were under the automatic arrest category. I became part of counter-intelligence unit. We arrested many Germans. We had good intelligence. We knew who we were looking for. We arrested 700 potential Nazi criminals.

Q: Did you interrogate them?

A: Yes. A number. The uniform response was typical. No admission of guilt. Only occasionally, someone said, "Yes." Usually they said, "I was following orders. I was only a soldier. I was a member of the Party."

Q: Those few who did admit to some wrong. Do you recall any particulars?

A: Only a few Germans civilians I ran across. As an American soldier, I went back to my home town where I was born -- beginning of June, 1945. Since my mother and sister did not leave when I left, they perished in a concentration camp. We were able to determine that they died in the last two or three months of the war. At the beginning of 1945. The last we knew was that they were interred in Camp Stutthof, (he spelled it) near Danzig. A first cousin of mine who was with my mother and sister also. Then the cousin was shipped to Bergen-Belsen. I assume most

people perished during the winter. It was cold. The Russians were advancing. The Germans were evacuating them (the prisoners) and they were just dying en masse. They were deported in the beginning of 1942 to Lithuania. From the end of '43 they were in various concentration camp and at the end they were in Concentration Camp Stutthof. They tried to get out of Germany when I did, but it was difficult. My mother was a widow with three children. We tried to get her out. A brother of mine went to Palestine in 1938. So he was saved. But he died in 1945 fighting the British. My mother got me out with an aunt in Chicago. So I returned to my home town, a small agricultural town in Hesse. They had many casualties. They had a population of about 4400. Twenty-five percent were in the army... perished in Russian front. Many killed. There were small towns in Germany, although they were Nazis, they were agricultural communities and were not aware of what was happening on the scale, The overall scope of the rest of Europe. I met acquaintances I had known before ... non-Jews.

Q: What was their reaction?

A: They were glad to see me back. They could not believe the atrocities of the camps. I would say that in many small communities of Europe they were not really aware of what was happening on the much larger scale. You got to keep in mind ... in 1944, '45 in Germany these people had no cars, maybe one radio in town ... fairly primitive living conditions. Getting newspapers maybe one or twice a week from the next larger town, Frankfurt or...and they were reading Nazi propaganda. They were Nazis and they belonged to the Party, but they were not informed. They were anti-Semitic, anti-Jews ... no question about it. That was part of Policy. One thing that took place in Germany during the rise of Hitler. It [Nazism] went down to the lowest level of German Society. There were Hitler Youth. It was part of the entire German psychology. But it's difficult to realize, unless someone from the immediate family was a camp guard or assigned to a camp, they would have no knowledge of the camps. And there was no camp in the area.

Q: How did you feel going back to your town?

A: Mixed emotions. The first thing I looked for ... in a small town you would go to the next town for services. We had to go by several homes between the two towns and every Saturday morning we went by and they would let the dogs loose to chase us. My first inclination: I would (find) and shoot the S.O.B. But he died in the war. There couldn't be a nicer fate. I went back to the cemetery where my grandfather and great grandfather and father was buried. The cemetery in the middle of Frankfurt is in fairly good shape. I am amazed. Maybe it explains the Germans Psychology. The Jewish cemetery in Frankfurt in the middle of 1945 is not desecrated anymore than any other German cemetery. They took metal and glass headstones. Stone and marble they left intact. Maybe that explains the German Psychology. Lots of respect for the dead and none for the living. I found no Jews in our town. There had been six Jewish families when I left. An additional three families migrated to Argentina. Two to the United States. My mother and sister were killed. Another family, the husband, wife, and one daughter were killed. And one spinster woman about 50 years old. They were the ones who were killed. Now the town is like other

small towns. I am going back probably in September. I am having a monument put in the cemetery in my mother and sister's memory. I have been meaning to do it for a long time. I made arrangements to do it. They are cooperating.

Q: Did you discuss what you had seen in the concentration camp in this country?

A: Yes. You have to keep in mind that in 1945 the newspapers, magazines were filled with the atrocities. The atrocities from Birkenau, Auschwitz, all of them. Life, Time, Newsweek were just filled with atrocities of World War Two. In 1948, '49 when the Nuremberg Trails died down, you didn't hear about it so much. It is good that today an effort is being made so people should not forget what has happened.

Q: You feel that giving testimony is good?

A: It should have been done in 1945 when people had better recollections of everything that had taken place.

Q: Do you think most GIs would tell what they saw?

A: Yes. no question. They would have been willing to tell.

Q: What sort of lesson or meaning can we derive out of what you saw, out of your family's experiences, out of the tragedy of the Holocaust.

A: I have always taken the philosophical view that just because these horrible things have happened there is still much good in most people. But this can only happen when you take a certain segment of society and relegate its people to sub-human status. Then you are willing to accept that someone is inferior, because you have been given a reason for what you are doing. The lesson we have to learn is that we can never permit any segment of society to be persecuted, to be delegated to a sub-human environment. It is a constant need among us. Look at what is happening at other parts of the world. Cambodia, Vietnam. Basically it comes down to saying these people are expendable. Life is cheap when you fight for survival. And people quickly forget. I was nine years old the day Hitler came to power. The doctor came from a town 50 kilometers away from where we were living to care for my grandmother. He was a member of the Nazi Party. He said... "Something wonderful has happened. Hitler is the new chancellor." The first signs of antisemitism came ... It started at first in the boycott of Jewish stores. It started in beginning of 1933, '34 and accelerated in '35. I attended German public schools until 1938. Until the week before I left for this country. From that point on you (Jews) could no longer attend any German school. But I had finished school and I left. My brother who was two years younger could not attend school, so we had a Jewish teacher come from miles away. From a town about 10 kilometers away. But then he went to prepare himself for live in Palestine. In school, after Hitler's assumption of power, there was a wave of antisemitism. The antisemitism didn't really start for us until 1935 or '36 when a new teacher was brought into the town. A new teacher who was totally indoctrinated in Nazi philosophy. He made fun of us. Singled us out,

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made typical (anti-Jewish) remarks, etc. So by 1938 my family had the feeling they wanted to get out. Life was becoming untenable. In 1937 we first tried, but I left in 1938.. My mother was a widow with three children and she could not get out.