

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Interview with Milton Shurr, tape 3, side A.

One thing, going back to Buchenwald, the different groups, they had little cliques. They had cliques just like any prison or so on. And obviously, the communists were highly organized, and they apparently were in charge of the distribution of food and clothing and things like that that mattered.

We had no control over that. There was no real way because, again, you know, if your indigenous staff-- it was just the four officers and seven enlisted personnel, and a bunch of Dutch and Ukrainian hangers-on. You really had no control over things, and you made use of the system as it went.

And this seemed to work pretty well. The only thing that occurred that I thought that was unfortunate was the fact that the communists ran amok and grabbed all the valuables, you know. But other than that, this system seem to work and the people were generally satisfied. As some of our foreign officers, liaison officers, were leaving, we had Polish, Belgian, a couple of French. I think we had this French team of [? wax ?] who didn't do anything.

And well, the Polish officer left. He and I were very good friends. He gave me his portable typewriter, and he said he put me in for a medal. Well, since the government-in-exile never got authority, I never got my Polish medal. But anyway, the thought was very kind and appreciated.

There were a lot of interesting little incidents along the way, but I remember one time, another first lieutenant called me in and said, why don't you help me put together a few binoculars. So we went into the binocular unit where they had small parts, and we put together a few binoculars. They weren't too good, but I had a couple that worked pretty well, that focused pretty well.

So we were trying to do things like that. And I picked up some books, pictures and things like that, and much of that I turned over to the Holocaust Museum, including there was a very interesting picture of a young man being led into the woods lined up, blindfolded to be shot. And there were about four pictures, I think. And the back of it said Nur, only for Germany, only for the official service, war service.

I got a call from the Holocaust Museum wanting to know who was that person. I said, I don't know. I mean, that was just pictures I picked up. And I had some books. I had a Mein Kampf book that was probably produced in the millions, and apparently, it was presented to every married couple. And this was one of the officers at Buchenwald, so I thought it had a little significance, I felt like, right.

Among other things I turned over was a little aluminum airplane about like that, a Stuka. And I turned it over to them an ashtray from a truck piston. It was about this round, this high, and they soldered some cigar rests on it. And the back was says the name of the deputy, [GERMAN] whatever it was, Fitz. So those are some of the kinds of things I turned over to the Museum, along with, I said money, a number of clean patches I had.

What's interesting is that the Seventh Day Adventists at Buchenwald were the servants to the SS people. They used them as servants. There were three stone buildings, and they have pictures of it, really sort of a good, middle-class type of residence. And most of the officers lived in one of them. And since I came late, I didn't have a room for myself, so they gave me a whole house.

And so I put up a cot and a bed roll in one of the bedrooms upstairs and put a lock and chain so I could have some security in the room, my possessions and things. I had a little trunk there with a few things. That's how I lived. Went down for breakfast at the other house where the mess for our units was taking place.

So it was a very busy period for me. And I was always under stress because you had to outmaneuver the Germans, the municipal authorities getting food, and constantly looking, constantly searching for food and clothing for our people. And that's why I never got into the minutiae.

Here, I was delighted to see the Red Cross workers, delighted to see the Joint Distribution Committee people, and give

them jobs. And that was the way I operated, and probably, it was a function of the fact that I'd been in community organization. I'd worked with a lot of different agencies, and I was able to develop priorities on a community basis.

And I felt that the interviews that I gave originally, for example, what we were down in Bethesda making the videotape, here comes some fellow who was a soldier of [INAUDIBLE] Army, and he'd visited a concentration camp, and his testimony was, oh my god, it was so terrible. I never saw anything worse in my life, you know, stuff like that.

Well, it makes good copy, but you're not doing anything for the good of the party in terms of the survivors. And I just couldn't talk to these people who were survivors who wanted to go. They heard that they had their sister in the Bergen-Belsen or some other place. And everybody wanted to go everywhere, and we had no means of sending them anywhere.

Theoretically, they could walk out of the camp, but they stayed around camp because there was food there, and protection. And that's the difference between the different personalities of how they operate. I don't know how they operated the other camps. It was a terrible experience. For about 30, 40 years or more, I just couldn't talk about it. We visited Israel on one occasion. I remember there was an opportunity to visit the Vod Hashem there, and I just couldn't do it. And I practically never talked about Buchenwald.

When did you start talking about it?

Well, when they were building the Holocaust Museum. Of course, they knew from my bringing over some objects and so forth that I had been there. I had a call from somebody on the staff who said that Station 9 wanted to interview me about the Holocaust, and would I do it. And I said no just like that. My wife said I should call them back.

And she said, you have a responsibility to society. You were there. You saw these things and you can verify them. And so I said, all right. So I did, and so I was interviewed by a young man from Channel 9 for about a half hour or so. The museum hadn't been open. It was in this process being built, and it was put on TV.

Well, we went out of town. I never did see that, but friends of mine have seen this and just thought it went very well. But after that, I was able to talk about it. It was sort of like a catharsis. And sometimes my wife thinks I talk too much about it, but that's neither here nor there.

So you've been talking about it for about six or seven years now?

Yeah, just about that, since that time.

Well, no.

The Museum opened in '93.

Yeah, well, this was from '93 on.

Oh, I see.

Yeah, so it was about three years of time. Yeah, up to that time, I couldn't talk about it. It was a very painful experience for me and probably it was painful than I realized. You had to take a professional attitude as to the pitiable state of how people were and what was going on. And one of the things they did-- and I have some pictures that were taken of that. Some time, oh, some few weeks or months maybe after the liberation, the inmates themselves, the prisoners themselves put on a show. What they did is some of the artists began to develop posters.

Some had exhibits of whipping chairs and other devices of torture. And they put them up at different parts of the camp. And I took pictures of them. And why somebody doesn't use that material because it was basically from the experience of prisoners, for example, that one big sign, "50,000 dead, Buchenwald." When we arrived here about 15,000 survivors more or less. And it was a terrible thing. And Buchenwald, really, as far as camps go, it was mild compared to what went on in these extermination camps.

As I said, and it probably-- and Buchenwald was used from an architectural standpoint. They used some of the way, the layout and so on. But these, the camps at Auschwitz and so on were many, many times larger. And they were really efficiency systems of getting bodies into the gas chambers, moving the bodies towards the crematoria and so on. And it was just everything done by wholesale a lot.

So that in some sense the situation in Buchenwald was-- well, it wasn't mild. It was-- there wasn't blood flowing in the streets, literally, as it was in the other place, although some terrible things had happened there. Anybody looking at that wall seeing these meat hooks, people who have in their torture were scratching into the walls, digging into the walls and see these grooves in the walls, you know, it doesn't take a great stretch of the imagination to think what had happened.

And the prisoners used to tell us what was going on. It was incredible. Of course, having been a science and biology major and so on, I mean, being in public health, I was probably a little less squeamish than most people would be. But it was pretty bad, pretty brutal, pretty brutal experience. And the gypsies, there were a lot of gypsies incarcerated. I told you about Seventh Day Adventists who were used as servants. The gays had their pink triangles. I don't know what things happened to them.

Were they held there as well?

Oh, yeah, oh sure. Again, you know, that wasn't-- Germans thought they were, you know, worthless people . And they were segregated. And then you had these various groups.

Was there much interaction between the groups? were the Gypsies and the Seventh Day Adventists interacting at all? Or were they mostly kept in their own areas?

Well, there'd be nothing to keep them apart. You know, within the barbed wire, the double rolled barbed wire, electrified wire, you know, people could mill around and probably did. No, I'm sure there was conversation. Although, as I said, the Russians, the communists had a hard inner core which helped them to survive a little better than the rest.

Because they were able to seize things and control them. And I suppose there were some favored individuals who were being like trustees who, you know, did the Nazi bidding and so on and so forth. That I don't know. But I was surprised that happened.

But generally, the people were fed about 600 calories a day. And that would enable them to survive physically for about six months. If they became ill, of course, they would die sooner. There was no medications of any sort. And go ahead.

When you came in, were you conscious of how many calories they were being fed? And did you try to slowly increase how much they were eating? Or, I mean, because it could be-- it could be more harmful to eat too much right away. Were you conscious of that?

Well, no, no, emphatically, no. Although I was conscious of the problem, some of the people who were so debilitated by starvation, they were put to a kind of impromptu field hospital. And they tried to revive them, you know, in terms of injecting fluids and things. And some they did, some they couldn't. But generally, it was pretty tough going. Yeah, sure they [INAUDIBLE].

But you've got four officers, seven listed personnel. You know, you can't spoon feed a starving population. No, you had to take things since they had to regulate themselves. You couldn't do it. It was impossible to do it.

And the name of the game of survival. And the only thing we could provide is protection and try to get food into the camp as much as we could. And just imagine, you know, a handful of people running a tremendous system like that.

Fortunately, you know, there was an ongoing system of cooks and bakers and warehouse people so on. Somebody showed their appreciation to me by giving me, apparently, a leather coat, a short coat that was worn by, I guess, people on these sea patrols. And it was a high status thing. The communists all had them, you know?

And one of the communists gave me or somebody else gave me a coat [INAUDIBLE] they gave me a coat which they appreciated the fact that here I was, you know, going all out on their behalf irregardless of nationality, religion, or what have you, you know? So I suspect, I talked about the Czech fellow who, wanted me to partake his hospitality, his family, yeah, I think the prisoners appreciated what we were trying to do.

Because they were so eager to find food for us and tell us where it was. This was our own information outfit. They were part-- we were all working together. And they knew we were using our authority to seize goods and products on their behalf.

I think there was a good deal of conflict among the different groups for various reasons. But they were able to mix and move around. But I suspect that they continue to stay in their barracks, which were pretty miserable.

Although they probably weren't as crowded because, you know, almost immediately, all the Germans left, all the Allied people left. We found records that indicated some number of American fliers had been picked up. And their records of-- these records were all destroyed by the looting by the communists and so on. But we did know there were some Americans and some other allied military personnel.

Probably as many of them died, I don't know. We have no way of knowing. There were records but, again, we didn't have any way of knowing of handling this stuff. It was just beyond our capability. It was a small team. And we had a limited function.

Fortunately, our team had a good experience running displaced persons camps that particularly enlisted personnel and everybody knew what to do. And everybody was, you know, was self-operators. This one did that this, this one did this, so forth and so on.

My only job was to make sure that there was good morale. For example, at a time when we were in Belgium, all the officers and enlisted personnel ate at one long table, Officers at one end, enlisted on the other. But we had some of our Ukrainian girls who were part of our cooks, cooking team.

They would serve the officers first. And enlisted men would get served secondly. And so on of the ringleaders of among the enlisted personnel came to me and said, we just don't like this and so forth and so on. So I said, well, I said, the only thing I could do is have them serve you first.

And when all efforts that you can have all the seconds you want and only when all the seconds have been tended to will they offer the officers seconds and so on. And that's the way it was, you know? And I got the liquor rations, PX rations and stuff like that.

So the morale was pretty good among the men. But they were often-- they were all individuals. They were all hardworking. They all did their job. And we all had a good time, you know, despite the stress that we all were under. And that's pretty much how it worked, how we worked it.

OK, is there anything else--

I don't know. Well, I suppose there is. I could talk forever on the subject. But it was a traumatic experience. And I would just as soon not have gone through it, you know, in retrospect.

OK, well, I thank you.

Well, you're very welcome.

This concludes the USHMM interview with Milton Shurr.