

Summary of Oral History: Oral history interview with Jalmer A. Lake

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This Summary was written by a USHMM Volunteer on 04/2022

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History

(Audio Only)

(Tapes may not be in their proper order as Tape II has the more complete, structured interview, while Tapes I and III are more conversational with frequent crosstalk and comments by the interviewers. For ease of reading, the more complete Tape II is placed first.)

Tape II: Interviewed by his niece, Jalmer Arnold Lake states his birthday March 12, 1924 in Minnesota; describes his service in the US 131st Evacuation Hospital unit serving as a cook in Germany under command of Colonel Dale G. Friend; prior to his arrival at Camp Gusen on May 7, a concentration camp in Austria, he had not heard of the camps' existence; describes viewing the kitchen, his area of immediate focus, as it was full of bodies upon his arrival; his estimate of a one-time total camp population of 48,000 but with about 12-14,000 survivors; his role as an impromptu Finnish translator, due to his heritage, for Finnish prisoners, in addition to his regular kitchen duties; describes the horsemeat stew/soup that he first prepared for the prisoners to which baked goods were added a few days later; describes (unshown) photos of the camp that accompany the testimony; speculates on the reasons for existence of Finnish prisoners; describes two pencil sketches he has of himself in his home from a Polish prisoner in the camp; describes his impression that some prisoners had been there for as long as seven years with some receiving special treatment for sexual "favors"; describes what his wife, Norma Governor Lake (born March 13 1925), did during his service; Norma describes her life before and after his deployment including her work in a shipyard, her children, and how she come to learn about her husband's experiences; and Jalmer describes that, in their hunger, some of the prisoners were dangerous in their search for food.

Tape I: Starting without an introduction, Jalmer describes what he saw when his unit first arrived at the camp around May 5, 1945; nearby U.S. infantry captured some of the SS guards; describes obtaining food for the prisoners' immediate needs with his particular focus on baked goods; cooking for the prisoners for about seven weeks; describes some prisoner resistance attempts; describes the methodology of estimating the number of Jews killed in the mass graves; describes unshown photographs of the camp provided by the unit's chaplain.

Tape III: Jalmer is looking at the names of the men and officers of the 131st Evacuation Unit with which he served while in Germany. Those mentioned included: Frank T. Duncan of Oklahoma, Maurice Duncan of Alabama, Edgar Lawrence of Oklahoma, Lawrence Lawson, William Long Pumpkin, Edgar B. Nash of Minneapolis, Lawrence Swanson of Iowa, Henry Kaler of Minnesota, Dominic Valentine of New York, and Edwin Myers of Oklahoma.