

Recording the remarks made by David Saltman on April the 20th, 1986 at 9:25 PM, at my residence at 201 Allen Park Road. This tape is being sponsored by the Oral History Project of the Jewish Federation, which is involved in recording the stories or comments or testimony of the Holocaust victims in this area.

Mr. Saltman was an officer in Patton's Army who fought in Europe, and at the conclusion of the war was the Prisoner of War Affairs Officer for one of Patton's divisions. The next voice you hear will be that of Mr. Saltman.

At the time that I'm recording this, at the end of World War II in Europe, I was a captain in the Army of the United States. The war in Europe finished. And my last point in our combat area was at the Elbe River near the city of Magdeburg, which is East Germany.

We were waiting there, waiting for the Russians to catch up to us since we had advanced so rapidly. They had not yet reached their sector. When they reached the opposite side of the Elbe River, there was a dead silence, and they refused to cross. It is ironic that after the Germans had blown the bridge in our faces across the Elbe River, those able-bodied ones swam across to surrender to the Americans rather than surrender to the Russians.

This particular sector was given back. And the army of occupation was given to the Russians for the sole purpose of occupying it according to a pre-arranged agreement between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill. The American Army was to go back down south, covering the area of Germany, generally Bavaria and an area to the north. The British had their sector. And the Russians had took over the northern sector of Germany.

When I got to Bavaria, I was assigned to headquarters, Third United States Army, commanded by General George Patton. My job was Prisoner of War Hospital Officer for what is known as Patton's District of Columbia, which is Third US Army headquarters, covering the area from Munich, Germany to Salzburg, Austria. At that time, I was given freedom and flexibility. My mission was the security of German prisoners of war who were hospitalized. Therefore, my time was my own.

As part of this particular operation, I visited Dachau to see what it was like. In Dachau, we had already released all of the Jewish displaced persons, and we filled it with German SS. That was a very large, sprawling camp. And I also made it my business to visit the ovens where so many Jews were cremated.

The ovens were very small, and it is quite obvious to see why Jews were starved to death before they were burned to death. The ovens were too small to take care of any Jews of normal weight. I saw footprints on the wall-- I repeat, on the wall-- because the bodies were stacked up like so much firewood.

I also took occasion to study Germany, and I found myself a German interpreter. I also found a very unusual German, one of the rank of baron, who spoke excellent English and who was one of these rare Germans who escaped occupation and the German Wehrmacht, or the SS. He knew the Germans well, and he helped me considerably as I recorded the story. And I wrote a large article called, "A Study of Germany from VE to VJ Day" while I was stationed in Bavaria, Southern Germany.

I also had occasion to interview a guard at Dachau who claims he knew nothing of what was going on in the furnaces and in the camps. I also had a young lady with me who had graduated from one of the German universities, also very fluent in English, and whose father was a lieutenant colonel in the German Wehrmacht. None of them could ever believe that a guard could be in Dachau and not know what is going on. I would believe that because in the rank and file they don't know what's going on at the top command.

There is no question about the extermination. There is no question about the cruelty. And there's also no question about the fact that the Germans always follow a leader, admire a leader. And that made it possible for Hitler to succeed as leader of Germany.

It may be interesting to note that this young lady's father, whom I met later on, who was a lieutenant colonel in the German Army, was stationed at the Russian front. At the time, they had a non-aggression treaty between Germany and

Russia. Hitler violated that. And as battalion commander, he felt very much ashamed when he was given orders, along with other artillery units, to open fire against the Russians.

You may call this man a war criminal. In my mind, he is not. He was in command of an artillery battalion. He had no choice. I do not consider him a criminal. In his heart, he did not like what he had to do, but he did it.

At the same time, back at the headquarters Third Army area, in a town called Bad Tolz, which, incidentally, still represents one of the headquarters areas in Germany of the United States Army-- that area was once a German Army headquarters. And even now, in 1986, the American Army has used it as one of their many bases.

What can we say about history today? It is true that the young Germans don't know what it's about. And I hear many stories that many of them do not believe that there were any such thing as an atrocity of around 6 million Jews. There are many people in the United States of America who share the same opinion. They were never there. But the atrocities and all the pictures taken, official pictures taken by the United States Army which would show the emaciated victims-- and there were many of those taken-- bear mute evidence, bear pictorial evidence to the Holocaust area.

I'm going to come along and turn the clock forward to a visit that I paid to Germany in 1984. I visited an American officer and one of the many camps at Stuttgart in Germany. And this particular officer, who was a major in the Joint NATO Command headquarters, when I asked him point blank, what is the danger of Nazism springing up again, and his comment was simple. That is not the area of a problem. The Middle East is a problem. And remember, this is 1984.

We can take the Holocaust and hate Germany. But in 1986, we'd better like West Germany because without them, there would be no North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The city of Stuttgart is especially heavily-ringed with American camps. There are many American camps all over Germany. And without their cooperation, NATO would not exist.

Every country is selfish and does the minimum. Shall we say, forget Germany? Forget the German atrocities? The Jews do not have to come along and go back as early as World War II to think of atrocities all through our civilized history. We can go back to the time of the Egyptians, when the Jews were in slavery. And the question of Holocaust tragedies and murder and indifference continue today, especially with the Afghans in Afghanistan under Russian control.

There is a time to be sensible and a time to remember. Japan started World War II. Today we are very friendly with Japan, even though we did drop an atomic bomb to bring the war to a quicker conclusion.

Mr. Saltman, it's been a privilege to listen to you. But may I ask a few questions? I'd like to ask you if, in 1945, when you were with the German prisoners of war at Dachau, were there any Jews at all that you witnessed in the area at all? Or had all the Jews left the area?

When I was in that area that I talked about between Munich and Salzburg, Austria, all of the displaced persons had left the area. There were none in prison camps.

To your knowledge, had any of them been moved to other camps, displaced persons camps within that particular area you were in?

No. We were not interested in trying to-- we did not believe in imprisoning Jewish people or any displaced people.

I may have phrased it wrong or been misunderstood. I merely meant that when the Jewish displaced persons were taken from the camps, they had no place to go. And there must have been areas where they were, where they could get food and clothing and directions and assistance-- psychological, medical, et cetera. Were there any in your area at the conclusion of the war?

There were none in my area in that so-called District of Columbia that I mentioned. Of course, we took care of them and gave them food, shelter, and clothing. I think I mentioned the fact that we did-- after we took the displaced Jewish people out of Dachau, that we filled it up with SS prisoners of war. And we really had it filled and jammed to the rafters.

I would like to ask a further question. Have you, during the past decades since you returned from the war, been in touch with any of the prisoners, the former Jewish prisoners at all? Have you met any at all?

Yes, I have. I have met several people. And I have had them show me the numbered stamp on their arm which they had to carry. I have met several of them.

Have they in any way responded to your contact by speaking at all about their past in the camps?

The people I contacted were very young. And probably that is the reason they escaped a massacre and annihilation. But they, of course, remembered it and remembered it well. But that is about all. They were very young, and they were very fortunate.

In other words, these former survivors that you met in no way spoke about the Holocaust, their problems, their thinking at all? They merely mentioned that they were survivors and showed you the numbers?

Naturally they knew of the history about their friends, relatives, family, about their extermination. They were well aware of that. But they were glad to be in the United States and be able to take advantage of a country that gives them the freedom to be able to establish their own business and do whatever they wish. But that is all. They were too young to really be, themselves, into the atrocities.

Because we have noticed that it has been a problem, that when we do meet some of the survivors, there is a hesitancy to speak at all about it, as if it was something that they try to put in the back of their minds. And it has been quite a problem, I understand, to get many people to come out to speak about their feelings and the terror and so on that happened during their stay in camp. And I think that probably when someone is young, they would still have the same feelings, but may not wish to talk about it. Was that your impression?

I would say so. They did not want to talk about it at any length.

This is side two of an interview with David Saltman, who was a captain in the active military forces in Germany from 1941, I believe, through 1945, and thereafter with the army of occupation, functioning as a Prisoner of War Hospitals Officer. The preceding side has been a side in which he has spoken about his impressions of what has happened in Germany at the time he was there.

Now I'd like to ask a couple more questions. I understand, Mr. Saltman, that you were involved in the Battle of the Bulge. Is that true?

That is correct. At the time of the Battle of the Bulge, I was with Ninth United States Army up in the northern area. And when the Bulge came, it happened that I happened to be at a Dutch coal mine taking a bath. That is a luxury to be able to get some hot water and a civilized place.

And when I came back and I got on my radio as I was heading back to the main forces, I received an incident command. Silence your radio and come back immediately. Out. I did that. And as I was moving in toward the area, I met my battalion coming in the opposite direction. I made a U-turn and fell back in line, not knowing where I was going or what was happening.

The mission at that particular time was that this sudden excursion of the Germans in this Battle of the Bulge meant that they had to draw forces from the north, from the south, and wherever they could to reinforce First United States Army to contain the bulge and drive the Germans back.

From my standpoint, the Battle of the Bulge in Germany violated all military precepts. The Germans laid many mines, but the tanks were road-bound in these mountainous areas of Belgium which I were at. The temperature was rather cold, about 20 degrees below zero quite often, but we managed to stand it. And we painted our tank destroyer units white in order to-- acting as camouflage against the snow.

The situation was so fluid that while I came back and I had a particular radio vehicle, I was asked by a division commander to please make contact with all of the various elements of a tank destroyer battalion to which I was assigned so that they could somehow try to draw the line of battle, which was totally confused This was in December 1984.

1944.

Sorry, December 1944. That was an unbelievable situation, but the Germans were very clever. Many of them wore British uniforms, had been educated in Great Britain and were able to talk with British accents, so they fooled a lot of people. Nevertheless, they took advantage of the fact that they were fighting against green troops, green American troops. And to see tanks go road-bound, up one road and down another, and be able to make a penetration the way they did is an unbelievable situation in military concepts.

Nevertheless, we fought. We tried to contain them. The battle was very heavy. We sustained a lot of casualties. They did also. But their retreat, I'm afraid, was quite orderly.

I was very much in the thick of it. I will not go into the details of the men that I had trained during peacetime, during this excursion into Belgium. But finally we got them back.

And it was interesting. When we straightened out the line, Germany had lost its last resistance. And our unit went back up north to the sector which was opposite Holland. And the Germans distributed many leaflets by plane, saying, welcome back. The 10th Panzer Division is waiting for you. And like good Americans, of course, the white camouflage- they didn't have a chance to take that off. That was a perfect giveaway because it was much warmer up north, and they knew who they were. And this is how we went.

I was involved also at that particular time-- I was transferred to Second Corps. And also, by request, I was Liaison Officer with Combat Command of the Fifth Armored Division. This division, starting from the Ruhr River, made the final drive to the Elbe River in Germany.

It was quite an active unit. It spearheaded a drive with the infantry and the artillery following behind. The Germans could not believe it. But when you get into a fluid situation, everything you see in the movies and it looks like unreal, you have to remember that truth is stranger than fiction.

I was in this vehicle as liaison officer. There was an armored snake going through Europe. And we demoralized the Germans beautifully. Many of them wanted to surrender to us. We couldn't take them. They would walk in the opposite direction with their hands over their head, and we simply passed them by. I could reach my hand out and slap them over the head if I wanted to. It was that close. We still couldn't take prisoners. Our mission was to continue.

We got there fast enough. In one particular airfield, we shot down six planes. A little unusual-- the planes coming in to land thought they were still landing in German territory, but the American Army had moved so fast, that they couldn't believe it was otherwise. This armored snake that I talked about was moving along for 24 straight hours-- stopping, starting, advance elements shooting their way through-- and still moving on.

The infantry, particularly, following 20 to 30 miles behind the armored spearhead, were really mad at us because they had a tough job cleaning up and mopping up all of these prisoners that we didn't have time to take, and couldn't take because we didn't have the forces to take them. We were too busy on our mission. So when we got to the Elbe River and waited for the infantry and the artillery to reach us, this is the way it had to be. And I believe I mentioned before, that was the point at which we waited for the Russians to catch up to their sector.

Mr. Saltman, I believe that you were in contact with some organization in Brooklyn that asked for information and oral history on anybody who was working, who had been in the Army near the Dachau or other concentration camps. And I believe that you were in contact with them and gave them some information. Could you relate the information again, please?

In Brooklyn, there is an organization known as the Center for Holocaust Studies. They are on Avenue J. And I did tape

some information. They asked me questions. And I gave them all of the photographs, the official photographs from the United States Army Signal Corps that I had, many of which they already had in the books that they had published.

This organization will cooperate with anyone. However, of all of the people who have talked to them or given them information, they will not release information with anyone unless they get their formal permission. They have had so many requests. They have asked people like me if I would consent to giving my name if anyone asked for it. And I said, yes, no previous clearance is required.

They have also documented many people throughout the world who were in the Holocaust. And there was one case where I wanted to reach someone in Europe. And they had someone's name in Basel. That is Basel, Switzerland. But they insisted that if anybody wants to reach them, they'd better write to the Center for Holocaust Studies first. They do not make names public unless a full request is made and the other person will release that information.

Thank you very, very much, Mr. Saltman, for the information that you have related on the tape. We will ask you for permission to use this tape. And so we'll bring you a form which indicates that the information contained can be made available to the public through the AIC Oral History Archive Center, and no access to this information is permitted except as authorized by officials of the Oral History Center or by the persons designated by them. Your signature on the form will indicate your acceptance of the conditions of this agreement and my authorization to use the information which I have furnished for the aforementioned purposes.

Thank you again, Mr. Saltman. This is George Klein, the interviewer, residing at 201 Allen Park Road, completing this interview at five minutes to 10:00 on Sunday, April the 20th, 1986, for submission to the Oral History Project, which will check and note on exactly how this cassette is operating. Thank you.

This is a further comment made by Mr. Saltman. Mr. Saltman?

Perhaps you're interested in knowing what happens to people who are missing in action. I have a neighbor who lost a brother during World War II in the fighting. And all that he knew was that he was missing in action-- never knew how, where, or why-- when they were crossing, they believe, the Ruhr River or someplace in Western Germany. I took the army serial number of this person and said I would see what I can do.

So in 1984, when I was visiting Europe, I stopped in at a US Army military cemetery in Luxembourg, which, incidentally, is the area in which General George Patton is buried. And I asked if they could tell me where Leonard Sisselman was buried. They said, just a moment. They went to a book and looked it up.

They found his name. I checked the Army serial number to make sure there were no two people with the same name. And they said, he was not buried anywhere. He was missing in action. I said, how do you know it? And they said, because there is no indication of a place of burial. However, he is obviously on the wall of names in the American cemetery at Lorraine, France.

I therefore decided-- on my move beyond Luxembourg, I went and headed for the American cemetery in Lorraine. When I got there, I asked at the cemetery where I could find this person's name, as I understood that he was missing in action. I was told where to go. And as I moved along this gigantic wall of names, I did find the name of Leonard Sisselman, Private Leonard Sisselman, and also the unit to which he was assigned. And I photographed that particular action.

His brother had not known what had happened. And after some 40 years, he was very anxious. He went over later in the year to the same area to confirm what I saw. And he also took photographs of the same cemetery.

Just in passing, I might mention that I also had the privilege of visiting Hitler's retreat in 1945 at Berchtesgaden. It was up on top of a mountain. They called it the Eagle's Nest. And as we took an elevator up, it was a very spartan-like setting, by no means luxurious, straight chairs and very simplistic, very much typical of the dictator himself. However, this was one of his homes at Berchtesgaden.

This is not the place where he was found dead. He was found dead-- or not found dead, but he was known to have died at a bunker in Berlin.