

With a bit more English added to it, we picked up the language. We were able to converse after we'd been with them for a week. See, don't forget, we tended to stay with the same group of people.

This is very important. Because they regarded us as their passport to recovery, you see. As huts got evacuated, we tended, and chaps left the camp with their huts, we took over adjacent huts, survivors from. We became very close with them, in many respects.

When you said that you could carry on a conversation, was it just on the level of facilitating the work that you had to do or did it go any deeper?

Oh, no. It went deeper. We were able to talk.

But after we were there about four or five weeks, at the end of that four or five weeks. I don't suppose I could remember any of it today, but I must have picked up a fair amount of dog Polish, and possibly dog Hungarian, too, and certainly, one's schoolboy German was extraordinarily useful. Of course, they had learned some English. We were able to converse.

Leaders amongst them emerged, those who were going to-- I'm not talking about the [NON-ENGLISH], the SS whores. I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about people who emerged as leaders within the survivors.

Did they talk to you about what they'd been through?

Yes.

What type of things did they say?

Well, for instance, how it came about that the huts got as badly soiled with feces as they had done, why things were so bad. That apparently, they told us that the lavatories had ceased to work. The water supply had gone. The SS refused to allow them out of the huts to defecate or to pass their urine on pain of death.

So they had no option but to defecate where they stood. This is how the huts had started to get bad. Eventually, of course, they got bad because diarrhea overtook the lot of them and they became weaker.

But they told me about Auschwitz and how they'd managed to survive the gassings. They told me about the fact that they had seen parents and sisters and brothers annihilated in front of them.

They tell me how appallingly cold the winter had been. They tell me about the fact that the food had become less and less.

I'm told that there were scenes between the more well prisoners and the SS around the burial pits, where the SS were being used as labor. I never saw anything of that sort. I saw the burial pits being filled, certainly.

What kind of scenes?

I believe the British troops had to restrain the DPs from violence towards the SS. I never saw that.

Did the inmates say anything at all about how people had behaved towards each other in the concentration camps?

Are you referring to cannibalism?

Not specifically, but just the general way.

Well, cannibalism is what I thought you probably were referring to. Well, I think cannibalism did exist. They told me it

had. Quite frankly, I couldn't blame anyone. If I'd been in their shoes, and I'd have a choice of living and eating my next door neighbor who dies liver, or dying, I think I'd have eaten his liver, frankly.

I mean, death was so much a part of their lives, if you see what I mean. They were living. There was no such thing as the sanctity of death or of the dead body. It was a pure question of animal survival because these people had been degraded by the Germans. It was a systematic depersonalization, degrading.

For as long as they had been, the Germans had degraded these people from the time they'd occupied their countries. They degraded them by putting them into ghettos. They'd degraded them by making them into second, third class citizens.

They degraded them by herding them like cattle, by transporting them in conditions which were worse than animals would be transported, by totally dehumanizing them. Can you wonder of them becoming cannibals? I can't.

Anyone who survived by reason of becoming a cannibal, I would applaud and say, well done. You did it. You survived. Good for you.

Was there ever any suggestion in the conversations you had with them that anybody had been self-sacrificing?

Yes. I know that mothers would self-sacrifice for their children. Yes. Yes.

You haven't mentioned the question of children there. Did you see any children?

Yes. There were children. But I think I may have mentioned earlier, too, or maybe this is not recorded, that I have spoken to survivors, one of whom was in the children's hut which was liberated. There was a move amongst the DPs during the last months and weeks of the war to try and produce some survivors from amongst the children.

They did this by-- one of the DPs was a doctor. She gathered around her some nurses, trained nurses. They managed to produce a hut, whether this was with the knowledge and connivance of the Germans, I don't know. I've got no knowledge about this at all. But certainly, there was a hut.

This hut was going to be of children, who if anyone was going to survive, these children were going to survive. They got better rations. Rations were bypassed to this hut from other huts. They were going to survive these children. They did. They did.

But of course, I didn't know about this at all until speaking to this survivor that I spoke to, relative to this interview I did for ITN. Because the first thing that should have been done when the British went into the camp would have been to have liberated that hut and got those children out of that camp, got them into the barrack, into the Hohne area. I mean, Hohne area represented safety. The camp was a pestilence area. It was terrible.

Was there any evidence as to what the attitude of the inmates was towards the block leaders?

Oh, yes. Anti, still frightened of, but anti. As they got better and as they got stronger, the block leaders were cut down to size. I don't know whether any violence was ever offered to any of them, very possibly it was. I don't know.

But I don't know. It is said, you know, and I believe this, it is said that one had no real idea, one can have no real idea of what Belsen was really like, what any concentration was really like unless one had actually personally spent a night there in the camp.

I never did. I don't think I've got a clue as to how awful a place Belsen really was. I don't think any of us who didn't actually spend a night, spend 24 hours living in it as an inmate, could possibly know. I believe this to be true.

You talked about nationalities, Poles and Hungarians, mainly. Did you come across any other nationalities?

Oh, yes. There were Poles. Poles and Hungarians predominated. There were some Germans.

We had the man who invented M&B, the man who isolated prontosil, was rewarded for what he had done for mankind by being bumped off in the male block. There were some Brits there, people who had been, I think, largely they'd been brought into the camp because they were awaiting SS trial for subversive activity of one sort or another. I think they'd been aiding undergrounds and being picked up. I think there probably were a few ordinary military prisoners who'd just been picked up in the local fighting.

There were Germans. Germans who would be brave enough to just to be defiant to a man standing over them with a Tommy gun. I think they were extremely brave people. I wouldn't have had that amount of bravery, certainly not. I think these were the bravest people of all. I think the Germans who were prepared to say no, what's going on in this country is evil and wrong and I'm prepared to make a stand against it. These were the real heroes of that war.

Were they all Jews?

No.

Catholics, non-believers, the vast majority, of course, were Jews from Krakow and from Lodz and those towns on that part of Poland.

You talked about some people who told you that the communists got control of the kitchens.

Yes.

Who told you that?

Other inmates, inmates in my block, of my hut.

Can you remember who they were?

Oh, no. I can't remember details of any of them. All I can remember is I did get letters afterwards from inmates who had been taken over by Swedish Red Cross, mainly from Sweden, saying that they were being treated-- most of them were in a sanatoria, being treated for tuberculosis.

Did they say how the communists were supposed to have got hold of the kitchens?

That I can't remember. I presume the way they got hold of the kitchens was that by the usual infiltration method. You get one person in who brings another person in there. Presumably, they had got a communist cell. After all, they were political. There were people in Belsen because they were political prisoners, as well as being religious prisoners.

The countess you mentioned, the Hungarian countess--

Yes?

--in what way did she appear to be a countess?

Well, the people who were inmates told me she was a countess. She introduced herself, I think, it was a graf, I can't remember what it was. I was sufficiently impressed to accept that she was a countess. But it didn't make any art. She was dying and did die.

How were the dead disposed of?

Mass burial in the pits.

The inmates got too weak. To start with, the inmates had carried their dead out and left them for collection. I presume, they had been collected and they hadn't had to take their dead out to central points for burial. They may have done originally, originally.

Eventually, they were too weak to do so. They carried their dead out and left them as I told you earlier, like, empty milk bottles by the door. As they got weaker, they were unable to carry them. So they dragged them.

I remember being told very graphically by one of the inmates that as they dragged them along the roughened floors, their shreds of flesh would be torn off. They would leave them, again. Then, of course, eventually, they were too weak to do that. They just took them in the foundations or left them where they were.

They were collected on the sort of flat-top trucks that you see used in parks, sort of flat-topped trailers. Whether they were vehicle drawn or whether they were human drawn, I can't remember. It could have been either. Whether they were just dragged or whether they were pulled, I don't know.

But they would be dragged along. They would be they'd be loaded onto the trucks once a day, twice a day, taken to the pits at the far end of the camp. Situated between, again, a service area at the end of the camp, between the male and the female camp, was the crematorium.

Now the crematorium was not the sort of production line effort that Auschwitz had designed for it. See Belsen had not been built as an extermination camp like Auschwitz. Belsen was-- one doesn't know why Belsen was.

This is a curious thing. One does not know what Belsen was all about apart from the fact perhaps it was fulfilling the original purpose of the concentration camp, which was to take people they didn't want in the community out of the community. It wasn't a true extermination camp.

It wasn't a labor camp. There was no labor for them to go to. The fields, yes, but they couldn't absorb that sort of quantity of people doing agricultural labor in the fields nearby. There was no industry. Celle, a lovely little town, nice museum, very picturesque, but no industry. Hanover? Too far away.

No. But I suppose one has to ask. There was a correspondence in The Telegraph the summer of '84, summer, autumn of '84. There was a correspondence which tried to classify concentration camps into those which were extermination camps, and those which were concentration camps, and work camps, and so on.

I think the only classification that one can make of a concentration camp was what would be one based on time scale. Because you died whichever one you went to. It's just that you died rather more effectively and quicker in certain ones than in others. Belsen was a slow time-based one. Auschwitz was a quick time-based.

Now things got out of hand at Belsen. There had been a Russian prisoner of war camp on the same site. Indeed, I believe that there are mass graves of Russian prisoners of war on the perimeter of the camp, or in the fields just close by. But I don't know whether this is true or not.

It had been a prisoner of war camp. But as a concentration camp, it had only been a concentration camp as such for either two or three years, either '42 to '45 or '43 to '45. If you go back to the memorial now, I think that is made clear, that it was a short-lived concentration camp.

But things got out of hand. They got out of hand because they had overcrowded the place. They had been ashamed of what they had done in the East. They hadn't had time to kill all the people at Auschwitz. They'd had to evacuate them. There hadn't been a chance to get them all through the gas chambers, so they'd had to evacuate them.

This was equally true of one or two of the-- Ravensbrück had come through to Belsen. There was Auschwitz. There was Ravensbrück. There was a third concentration camp whose name eludes me for the moment.

The SS overcrowded the place. They had produced a situation which was self-perpetuating pestilence-wise. They'd

overcrowded it. They had completely swamped the sanitation facilities.

They had got, in any event, a devitalized population whom they had deliberately been underfeeding. Then suddenly, through monumental incompetence, sheer absolute monumental incompetence, they had produced a near starvation, near pestilence to total starvation, and absolute pestilence situation.

There was food, from all accounts. There was food. There were food stores within reasonable distance of Belsen which could have been used, which the SS could have got hold of, or so we were told. They weren't.

The organization had failed. All they had done was they had produced, within their own area, within their own countryside, within an area within which their own troops were fighting, an area of pestilence which was such that their professional army commander of the first German para army had said, no, we cannot allow our troops to be risked fighting in this area. We've got to ask that this be taken over and make it into an open area.

Have you seen anything as bad or worse than Belsen?

Oh, no, no, no, no. There couldn't be anything worse.

I'm not sure that this was calculated of what one was seeing. I don't believe that all one was seeing was calculating, calculated, deliberate we-will-starve-you-to-death cruelty. I don't think that was probably so.

I think that what one was seeing in the later stages of what one was seeing, the people who were dying from starvation, I think it was largely the indifference of people who really did believe that they were dealing with subhumans. I think they really probably did believe it. It was the indifference to this, just indifference to suffering, to human suffering. This is what was so awful.

I mean it's possible that this may have been part of a deliberate policy, we'll starve them to death. I don't believe it was. I believe that the starving to death was incompetence and indifference.

Looking back on Belsen, I suppose one's salient memories were the smell, the apathy, the dust, and the shoe piles-- obviously, the mass graves, too, but the shoe piles. Now, the shoe piles, if you walked through the center of the camp with the men's camp on your left and the women's camp on your right, down the center area between the wire, eventually you came to the crematorium on your right. Before you came to it on your left, there were two shoe piles.

These piles, as their names implied, were piles of shoes. Memory suggests, although I'm told this was not so, that they were in fact smaller, that they were the size, each of them, of a London double decker bus. These were shoes of inmates who had perished, or who had come into the camp and had their shoes taken off them. This is equally true. Because I don't remember seeing shoes on any of the inmates.

But I'm told that my memory is wrong here, that they were not the size of London double decker buses. They were about the size of pre-war London single decker buses. But there were two shoe piles.

Then you came to the crematorium. The crematorium was not one of the elaborate Auschwitz affairs. It probably held spaces probably for no more than about 12 or 20 people at a time, possibly not as many.

Now the thing about the crematorium that I remember was that it was surrounded by a concrete apron, a working area. The thing I remember about that concrete apron was that, in the raw edges of concrete around the edge of the apron, was calcined human bone. They had used human bone as hard core and as filling for the cement for making the concrete apron.

Now that suggests to me that that crematorium had been in operation for quite a long time. Because the Germans were in no position to start putting down concrete aprons in the last two or three months of the war. It was in the last two or three months of the war that the mass murders, the mass killing of Belsen represented, we found.

So it suggests to me that Belsen had been in business as a disposal area for some considerable time. Whether this was so or not, I don't know. But that was the feeling we had at the time. I can remember very vividly the concrete apron. I can remember equally vividly the raw edges of the concrete with bits of human bone laced in.

One thing about the memorial, should one ever visit it, and one sees the mass graves, on each of the mass graves, there's a stone saying so many people buried here. It's absolute nonsense. One hasn't the faintest idea how many people were buried in each grave.

The grave was made with a bulldozer, and it was filled. I don't remember ever seeing a body count of people, how many went into each grave. They were filled until they were full. Then another grave was started.