

This is Ray Kaner from the Center for Holocaust Studies, 1609, Avenue J, Brooklyn, New York, interviewing Mr. Richard Elberfeld, Hamilton, Ohio. Could you tell me, please, when did you enter the army? Were you drafted or you volunteered?

No, I volunteered for the American Field Service, which was an ambulance unit attached to the British Army in May of 1943. I was sent to India for a little over a year, and then was transferred to the European Theater of Operation in 1944.

What was your rank?

We actually had no rank. We were considered, I hate to say it, but camp followers in that we were volunteers attached to the Army doing medical work.

Could you tell me which camp you liberated, and what day was it?

It was the first part of April in 1945. We were detached to Bergen-Belsen, and we were there for approximately four weeks from the time we entered the camp.

Could you tell me, what did you find when you entered Bergen-Belsen, being that I am a survivor of Bergen-Belsen? I was there from December '44 until the liberation, which was April 15, 1945.

Well, we found thousands of unburied bodies when we went in. We found other thousands of people who were near death, who were in the huts or in the fields, in the compounds near the huts. And our responsibility was to clear these people to take them to the clearing station, to wash them, delouse them, and send them on to casualty clearing stations.

Did you find a lot of people dying still while you were there?

Literally thousands died after we entered the camp. I don't know the exact number of people. I don't know that anyone knows that figure.

When did you come to Bergen-Belsen?

I can't give you the exact date. It was sometime right after the middle of April of 1945.

Did you still find all these bodies that were lying for four weeks that weren't buried?

Well, we found bodies in all states of decay and decomposition, bodies that should have been removed long before they were. We were not involved in that particular project. That was done by the Germans who were there when we took the camp over.

But you were responsible for what the Germans-- you gave them orders.

Yes.

Now, what did the Germans do? Did they clean up? Did they bury?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

What?

The population from Bergen-Belsen, the village, did they come to witness?

Yes, we went out and got people from the village and brought them in. They also were engaged in the work of clearing the camp.

Could you please tell me your reaction when you came to Bergen-Belsen and when you found what you found?

Of course, it's a statement that really, it's been over work, but just abject horror. I mean, I had no idea that anything like this existed. I knew there were concentration camps, but I didn't know the enormity of the concentration camps and what went on there, the men, the women the children, and the state of death many of them were in, or near death.

Before you liberated Bergen-Belsen, didn't the Army prepare you?

No.

Did you have any knowledge? Did they know in the service?

We were told on one day that the next day, our assignment would be at Bergen-Belsen, and maybe I was particularly naive, but I didn't know what Bergen-Belsen was until I got there.

Now, could you explain the location and what you found? How did it look?

It was in northwestern Germany, not too far from Bremen, in the country, an isolated camp. That's about all I really know or remember about the location.

You still saw the barracks, which were later on--

We worked in the barracks. Part of our duty was to go into the barracks and clear the people out of the barracks to make determinations as to who we should save, who we should not save-- who we should attempt to save, I should say.

Who had priority to be saved? Well, in my mind, I can't speak for the others who worked there, but I sort of naturally gave priority, I think, to women. Now, in today's world, that probably wouldn't go over too well, but that's the way we felt at the time, and children.

I also would like to ask you how many people were helping out, and what did you do when you found these very sick people? Because I was there. I was one of the people that was taken out from the barracks, and we were put in to hospitals to where the SS were before, and there was also a cleaning process of the inmates. Where you taking part of this cleaning process, of cleaning the inmates before they entered another place?

Yes, we did.

Could you tell please what you found, and how did they do it?

Well, we would go into a hut and we would separate-- first of all, we would try and separate the living from the dead. People would be stuck together due to human excrement. They had been there. Most of the people were unable to even move. We would carry them from the hut. We would strip their clothing, strip the filthy blankets from them.

They would be taken then to a washing station, and would be washed and shaved and deloused. And then from that point on, we were sort of out of the picture. They were taken on to the German hospital or whatever, where they would receive further care.

Because I remember that many nurses from Sweden, from Holland, Red Cross, came and volunteered to wash us.

That's right.

Because we were with lice in our skin, and also, all these sick people with typhoid. I don't know whether you remember, they shaved again.

Yeah.

Everybody had to be--

They were shaved and deloused.

And also with DDT, remember. Powdered with DDT.

Yeah.

Now, how long did this cleaning process-- because I was already in hospital, I don't know-- did this take? A few weeks? How long?

Well, as I said, I was there for four weeks, and I think the process was still going on when I was transferred out of there at the end of four weeks, so I don't really know.

While you were there, what did the Germans do? What was their reaction? Did you speak to anybody about what they did to other human beings?

Well, our relationship with the Germans at the time was very strained, because we went to this little village near there and recruited Germans, and it was not on a volunteer basis, to come in and work in the camp.

The town was Celle, wasn't it.

That's right.

This was closest little town.

And many of the people in the town denied that they even knew the camp was there. And you could almost see the camp from the town, but they had no knowledge of it.

Did you see any children in Bergen-Belsen?

Yes, I did.

OK, could you tell please where did you find them, under which circumstances?

Well, the children, I can remember one group of children who were in a, I suppose for lack of a better phrase, it would be a sub-barracks inside the camp, because when we went in, there were children standing at the fence looking through the wire. And one sort of an indelible impression that I have is rather a nasty thing to say, but I was with a friend of mine, and I saw this one child who looked as if perhaps someone had dumped a bowl of tapioca over his head.

And I made the comment, that's rather a strange thing on that child. And my friend told me that these were louse nits or eggs that were completely over the child's head. Now, there was an example of one who got priority treatment, this little child, I remember.

This little child.

Yeah.

Well, I have to tell you that three weeks before we were liberated, there was no water.

Yeah.

And I myself didn't wash for nine weeks and didn't take off my clothes. So I know what was going on, that this was an epidemic of typhoid fever because of the lice, and they didn't do anything to help. They didn't give us the water to drink, never mind the washing. So I can imagine what you found, because when I was liberated, by the first group of British Army, when they came in, they came in with masks and gloves and boots. The whole body was complex because they were afraid to be in contact with us.

I believe that.

Now, I would like to know also, since you saw this camp, what was your feeling, and did this affect you for the rest of your life? Did this change your way of thinking?

Well, the only way really that I think it changed my way of thinking, it might sound a little trite to say it, but along with thousands of other people, I had no idea that this was going on. I knew that Hitler was persecuting the Jewish people and certain other groups of people, but I had no idea of the enormity of the crime, for lack of a better phrase, I'd say a crime against humanity that he was perpetrating at the time, until I got to Belsen, until I saw the suffering that was there, and the complete inhumanity of one group of people towards another.

And it has affected me. I mean, in recent years, it hasn't, but at the time, it did, and for several months afterwards. I was released from the service in June of '45, and I had some emotional problems that I think were pretty directly tied into what I had done at the Belsen camp.

Did you need medical help because of this situation?

No, I needed psychiatric help.

But you did get it?

Yes.

What do you say when a person approaches you and says this never happened, this is imagination of the Jews?

I'd say they're damn fools and don't know what they're talking about, because they don't. It was there. There was no question that it existed and that it happened.

Now, you never spoke to the Germans there?

No. The only thing that we spoke to the Germans about at the camp was to order them to do the work that we laid out for them to do.

Now, is there anything else that you remember, that you would like to tell, experiences pertaining to the Holocaust and to liberation of Bergen-Belsen?

I can't think of nothing else that I'd want to say, no. I'm really honored to be at this conference, if that's what you mean. But I can think of nothing further about the liberation that hasn't been told countless times by other people.

Well, are you speaking to your children, to your family, about your experiences? Or you kept it all these years without letting it--

No, I've said very little about it. There was a news release in a local paper last week, and one of my children, who's 30, called me on the phone and asked me about it, and said he'd never realized that I had been involved in this. And for quite a few years, I don't think I ever did talk to anyone very much about it.

Now, at this time, did you know that so many Jews were killed?

You mean at the time of the liberation?

Yes.

No, I didn't. I knew that many had been, but I had no idea of the magnitude of it.

Also, I would like to ask you, before you entered the service, did you know what's going on in Europe?

I think so. I think I had an idea that Hitler was definitely antisemitic and that he had a program to destroy Jews, but I didn't realize it was as effective as it was and as widespread as it was.

Now, being that you were in the Army, and I know that you saw many things happening to your friends, did this shock you when you saw how people were dying without a reason, without being shot?

It bothered me a lot, because I had been in, as I mentioned earlier, in the Asiatic Theater of Operation, and we were directly involved with combat troops. We were in Italy in the fall and winter of '44, and these were people, the ones that we worked with, the casualties, were young men who were soldiers.

And part of the risk of being a soldier, whether you like it or not, is that you run the risk of being shot or wounded. The people in the concentration camp were civilians. They were men, women, children. There was a great deal of difference in my mind.

Tell me, did you take any maps, diaries, photographs, documents from Germany?

No, I didn't.

You didn't care to be reminded?

Yeah.

OK, now I think this will close our interview, and I thank you very much.

Oh, you're welcome.

Thank you.

Being that I am a survivor of Bergen-Belsen and you are a liberator.

You're the first survivor I've ever met.

We waited for many years.

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To be liberated.

Right.