

TITLE - Major General Franciszek Skibinski, chief of Polish delegation attending the conference at the State Department in Washington, D.C.

I DATE - October 1981, tape #13

SOURCE - International Conference of Liberators

INTERVIEWER - Stellanwiesel Kier? associate director for center of Holocaust Studies research in Brooklyn, New York.

LANGUAGE - English

SOUND QUALITY - Excellent

IMAGE QUALITY - Excellent

DURATION - 26:58 minutes

NOTES - The Major General has a strong Polish accent that is sometimes hard to decipher. The interview was really hurt by the interviewer - she cut him off right when he started to describe explicitly the camps. There are two parts worthy of attention for the USHMM, 3:50-7:23 and 24:52-25:58.

0:50-1:17 Modest Role in liberation b/c he was Commander in armored brigade in Polish armored division in 2nd Canadian army corps. Went into Germany from Masse? and from the Rhine, from Holland towards Wilhelmstraffe.

- 1:50 On way eastward - Came across concentration camps when fighting the Germans for "professional purposes" - they liberated some prisoners of war and concentration camps.

- 2:16 During Battle for Poppenborg? on/near river Ehmes? Regiments came across not one single concentration camp but a clump of them which were centrally directed.

- 2:31 People in these camps were Belgians, Jews, Frenchmen and Germans.

- 3:40 Found out the camp his regiments liberated was one of the oldest German camps, established in 1933. He did not have time to go and see it right away, but saw it after most of the prisoners had gone. The camp's name was just Poppenborg and Tungsdorf?.

3:50-5:18 What did you find there when you entered the camp? Very usual site of concentration camp: Piles of very lean bodies in striped pajamas, crowd of very lean and almost dead prisoners, very glad to know they were liberated. Most left camp and went to German villages to get food. General Marchek, commander of the division, notified civilian govts. who were following the liberating armies and they were prepared to organize the prisoners. Does not know what happened afterwards to this very camp.

5:30-7:23 At same time they were concerned with two other camps, Auberlungen? and Giterlungen? situated near the Dutch border. These camps were full of Polish girls, soldiers, prisoners of war from the Warsaw uprising. Almost 2,000 Polish girls in uniforms. The girls were surprised that they were liberated not by the Americans, Englishmen, Canadians or the Russians, but by the Polish divisions. They took extra good care of these girls who ranged from 17 years to 30?years b/c they were women and b/c they were their own people.

7:35-8:15 Did they know what they were going to encounter? He knew there were POW and concentration camps but they did not know they would find those camps. They, the soldiers were not prepared to encounter what they saw at Poppenborg or at the Polish girls camp, morally or physically to deal with these camps.

- 9:20 Question of Polish Resistance. What did Polish Govt. actually know? He says that members of Polish resistance used to tell them since 1933 about what went on in camps, and if they did not know specifically what went on in the camps, they found out definitely by 1942.

9:30-15:20 How did he wind up in the Canadian Corps? He started fighting the war on 1 Sept. 1939 as Chief of Staff of the 10th Cavalry Brigade. This was the only Polish mechanized brigade. He was under the command of General Staszczak? Marchek, his commander til the end of the war. He fought the Nazis near the Polish frontier near the Tetra? Mts. He fought the rear guard from Krakov? til le Vov? His enemy was primarily the 22nd German Armored Corps commanded by General von Kleist. His unit was not beaten until the end of the campaign. On 17 Sept., near Volv? they knew the Russians were approaching from the east. He got the order from Gen -----? on 18 Sept. to cross the Hungarian border and to enter deep into Hungary. From there he traveled to France, most of his unit did itinerant? fighting, but in France, General Marchek organized the forces again and fought Gen. von Kleist once again, only this time in France. His forces, unlike the majority of the French forces, did not take many losses.

- 17:34 15 June, He remembers marching through unoccupied France and joined up again in Scotland with Gen. Marchek in the 10th Armored Canadian Brigade, which later became the 2nd Brigade. In the summer of 1944, this force went to Normandy and integrated into the 1st Canadian Army. He fought at the Battle of Normandy, pushing towards the mouth of Schell? (the Cauldron of Valez?) and the estuary of Masse. In 1945 April, he crossed the German border near Poppenborg and this is when they liberated Polish POW's and concentration camps.

- 18:46 Why were these girls in the camps? They were AK's, Army Kraova?, the underground army which fought in the Warsaw ghetto uprising in August, September and October of 1944. After the fall of Warsaw, they were taken prisoner and were treated as any other POW.

- 20:05 Was your family in Poland while you were fighting? His brother Frank was killed on 10 Sept. 1939 in Polish Air Force over Poland. Both of his parents died in meantime while in Poland. He left his wife, a very small daughter and two sisters in Warsaw. (One of) his sister's husband was executed in a concentration camp at Aurenburg?

- 21:00 Had his family had any contact with the Jews during the Warsaw ghetto uprising? His sisters helped them by supplying them with food but never with guns.

21:05-22:00 What was your personal feeling when you returned to Warsaw, Poland and saw it? He was shocked, it was a mountain of ruins. The eastern most part, the Jewish part, was unrecognizable. Not a single house stood, only ruins.

22:03-22:50 Did you meet anyone, Jews, after the war? He met one of his friends Dr. Horowitz? A good many of the soldiers in his brigade were from Poland and they returned to meet him after the war.

- 23:10 Many of his soldiers lived in Warsaw and to this day there is still erected something for the club of soldiers who fought in the 1st Polish armored division.

23:20-24:52 Does anything stick out in your mind about your experience of liberating these camps? He had heard stories, but at Poppenborg, the first camp he saw, he was shocked deeply. It was the beginning of April, it was still cold. It has left a terribly shocking impression.

- 25:58 Regarding Poppenborg - "I heard the stories about how camps were looking, but to see these heaps of terribly lean, naked bodies, lying like rubbish in very big quantities of earth." It was a tremendous shock to him and his soldiers.