

OK. Just so I can hear your voice on the microphone, tell me where you live.

Oh, where do I live? Webster, New York, six miles east of Rochester.

Uh-huh. You came a long way. Yeah. How many hours it takes to drive?

I left there a quarter after 7:00.

AM?

Got here, yeah.

Yeah.

Got here about 2:30, I think. If I hadn't gone and turned the wrong way when I got off the freeway, I'd have been here earlier.

OK. Here we are. This is Neenah Ellis interviewing Mary M. Wood. It's July 14, 1995. We're in West Park, New York. Please tell me, where were you born? When were you born? And where did you grow up?

September 5, 1917, Alexandria Bay, New York. And I grew up in Alexandria Bay till I went away to nurse's training.

Where did you go to nurse's training?

Syracuse, New York, Crouse Irving.

Hospital?

Crouse Irving Memorial Hospital.

Uh-huh. Did you always want to be a nurse?

I really don't know. That's just how it was. My sister was one, so then I sort of followed in her footsteps.

And when and why did you decide to go in the service?

Well, when the war started, I thought that's where I should be.

Did you have other members of your family in the service?

Oh, my father had been in the service. His brother had been in the service. But that's all.

But it was just the thing that--

Thing I thought should be done.

And where did you-- when did you go in?

July 8, 1942. I was going to NYU, so I waited till the semester was over before I went in.

You finished your nurse's training?

And then I was-- I did postgraduate work. And then I was working and going to NYU at night.

Working as a nurse? In the city?

In Queens, out in Jamaica.

And then you did basic training starting in July? No, you don't do basic anything.

I didn't. I got away with it.

How come?

I don't know.

Don't most people have to?

Usually they do. But they just sent me down to Fort DuPont in Delaware and that was it.

And how long were you there?

Let me see, was there in July, I was there till November.

1940?

Two.

Two.

And then tell me--

In '42, we went to Dix and Kilmer. And then I went to Africa. And I was in Africa from January till November of '43. November, I came home. And where'd I go next? Camp Dix, I think it was.

You were in North Africa with the Third Army?

30-Second Station Hospital in Clemson, about 100 miles outside of Oran.

Outside of what?

Oran.

Oran, a-ha.

That was the first time you were overseas?

What was that like?

We had a station hospital, so we got the boys directly back from the aid stations and what have you. So that's what we took care of there.

And then they were going home from there?

Most of them home.

Badly wounded.

Some were flown back, some went by ship on the hospital ships.

Well, when did you meet up with this group here now?

That was in-- must have been November of '44. November '44.

In England?

No, no. Met them in Charleston. I think it was Charleston, North Carolina, if I remember right.

Oh, you came back after Africa.

Yeah.

And then you went over with them to England?

Yeah, England, France, Austria, Germany, what have you.

Well, tell me about the experience at Mauthausen. What do you remember when you arrived?

Well, the smell. The bodies, the smell. And I was in the operating room. And we had to repair the damage that they had done experimenting on different people.

Really?

They used to-- well, they said they delivered babies, and held them up, and killed them in front of the mothers. They would maybe cut off a leg for practice. And we got some of those to take care of. But mostly, they were nothing but skin and bones. It wasn't too much to do surgically for them. We didn't have too much to do there.

Were you able to talk with those people who'd been?

No. See, the girls were out in the wards. I wasn't in the wards, I was in the operating room. So I really didn't get to talk to the people.

How did you know what had happened to them?

Well, from things we heard. Mostly from the men that worked in the offices and some that worked up in at Mauthausen, where the POWs were-- not our POWs, the Germans, the SS troopers, and that type of thing from them. The stories we got from.

What was a typical day like for you there? That was in June of '45. Or May of '45?

May of '45, yeah May and June.

You arrived shortly in early May. Am I right about that?

You know, I can't remember the dates. We went to Germany first. Then the men-- after the war ended, the men, the officers, and enlisted personnel went over to Camp Gusen and liberated it. And we were a couple of weeks later before we went over. They didn't want us at first. So it was a voluntary thing whether you wanted to go or didn't want to go.

Was it much of a choice for you? Did you have any?

No, we all said yes, we'd go. There wasn't any. I don't think-- nobody backed out, everybody went.

And what would a typical day like be for you? Do you remember?

Getting on the trucks, going to work, being sprayed with DDT for bugs.

Every day?

Yeah. Every day we got sprayed. Down your pants, up your shirts, down your shirts, every place they sprayed so you wouldn't get any fleas or bugs or what have you. In the operating room, repairing things that they had done to the people, that type of thing.

Long days, were they long days?

I don't think so, 12-hour day.

And then you would go back?

Oh, we had a house. We lived in a house. There's three or four houses. And everybody was split up into a different house. And we lived there. We ate in the mess hall. And we met a lot of nice people, made a lot of nice friends.

What was it like for you women in the evenings? What would you talk about? What would you-- you'd already been to Africa. But a lot of the women had never.

No, that was their first trip.

What kinds of things did you talk about in the evenings?

Gee, I don't remember. I really don't remember.

When were you discharged?

Oh, December 12, '45. That was the official date, but we left in September because we were in Camp Polk, Louisiana. We were discharged there.

Did you spend the whole summer in Europe?

Yeah, we got back in August.

Were you at Mauthausen the whole time?

No, when we first went in, we went over to England. We went to France, we went to Germany, and we went to Austria. Then we went to the camp. We had a tent hospital in Austria before we moved to the camp.

Mauthausen, you mean by the camp.

No, Gusen.

Oh, Gusen.

There's two. Gusen and Mauthausen. They're very close together.

And you worked at both?

No, Gusen.

Only Gusen? Oh, I'm confused then. I thought you were at Mauthausen.

No. Well, as I remember, Mauthausen was only where the-- there was an infantry group that was in there, men, and they had the prisoners there. I don't think there was a hospital up there. I don't remember it if there was.

And were they bringing, then, the survivors, the patients who'd been in Mauthausen? Were they bringing them down to where you were in Gusen?

I don't remember camp-- as DPs, what have you. No, that's displaced person. But I don't remember them bringing anybody down. If they did, I don't remember it.

So the people that you were caring for had all been at Gusen?

Mm-hmm.

And what became of those people over time?

I don't know because they were still there when we left. Because when we went in-- when the men went in, the Germans had released them. And they were out in the fields and they had to go get them and bring them back.

Because I remember, they were digging in the fields and ate raw potatoes. And it made them deathly ill because they weren't used to eating. And when they did feed them, they'd always save part of it under their pillow for fear they wouldn't get anything anymore.

And there were some musicians there. And they used to play at mealtime up on the stage, the ones that were able to play while we ate. But I don't remember eating in that dining room. We're talking about a lot of things, I remember that I don't remember.

Were you ever able to have conversations with those--

No.

--people at all?

I never did, no. Because, see, the operating room was here, and we looked out the window and the mess hall was there. I did go around in some of the wards to see the people. I never talked with any of them.

And there were only men there? You didn't see women and children?

Yeah, there was women there. I didn't see any children, yeah. Because I operated on women.

Because you what?

We operated on some of the women.

Oh, you did.

Yeah.

And they had suffered the same kinds of things?

Did I tell you? Nearby, there was a munitions factory in the mountain, inside the mountain, where the people used to go in there to work. So long as they were able to walk, they had to go there to work. They went there from the camp to

work. And there was also places where they actually made lampshades there out of human skin. And the big furnaces were there, where they-- whew, it's hot.

Want to take a break?

Where they burned the bodies.

The layout.

Oh, I can't even remember. All I can remember seeing that big oven with the doors open. There was, if I remember rightly, there was three of them. Did they tell you about the SS trooper that they killed?

We had natives, or what do you want to call them, natives. People who lived in the town came into work afterwards. They worked in the kitchens, and in the dining room, and what have you. And there was one German SS man. And those prisoners who were nothing but skin and bone killed him and hung him up on a fence. I have a picture of that at home.

Did you see it happen?

No.

And then there was the chaplain, his assistant doing all the burials, you know. And they had big, long trenches with bodies in long, long lines.

And they were doing that the whole time you were there? Every day?

See, a lot of them died at first. And matter of fact, you couldn't tell the live ones from the dead ones. That's how bad they looked.

Before you went in there, had you heard about that at all?

No. I hadn't. They just said we were going to a concentration camp. The colonel said, you can go or you don't have to go. It's up to you, whatever you want to do.

Did he tell you what it was going to be like?

If he did, I don't remember.

Were you shocked when you got there?

Oh, sure. When you don't know the difference between a live person and a dead one, it's pretty awful, grisly.

When you got out of the service, and in your later life, what do you think has been the impact of that experience on your life?

I remember, I was in Atlanta going down to see a friend. And we went to the movies. And there happened to be, remember-- well, you don't remember. There was newsreels then. And one of the newsreels showed the concentration camp. And a guy behind us said, it's all propaganda, that never happened at all.

An American guy?

And that, you know, that disturbed me a little. They had to hold me in my seat because I was ready to get up and punch a person. And then even now, you hear people say it didn't happen, but it did. Very much so.

Do you have family members?

Do they ask?

I have one son in the Air Force, and one son the Army, and one son is working for Uncle Sam as a park ranger. He was in the Air Force in Vietnam.

Do they ask you about your experience a lot?

Well, they've seen my pictures and what have you.

You took a lot of pictures while you were there?

I had a lot, real lot. And somebody said, well, I'll print them for you. I'll have them printed for you. I never saw them. I lost about six rolls of 36-- 35 millimeter film.

Before you got back? Yeah.

I had to go on an inspection trip in France. While they were setting up the hospital getting things going, I went on an inspection trip with two or three other officers. And I took a lot of pictures then, all through Germany, all the devastation that was on. That was before the war was over.

As a matter of fact, I was in the hospital in Brussels. What was the name of the place? Can't remember now. But I'm sitting down to eat in this dining room. Woman next to me said, that you are Margaret Wood? Yes. She was one of my teachers in school. She was a Red Cross worker. Another time in France, walking down the street, a boy I went to school with was there. Twice I ran into people. I mean three times. Once in England.

When you look back on that experience, was it a good experience or a hard experience? Or how do you characterize it?

It was good and it was hard.

What was good about it?

The things you saw, the people you met, the things you did, your experiences. Your friends. We've all been back and forth for years.

You've kept in touch with a lot of the women that you served with?

When you say the things you saw-- one of the good things about your experience was the things you saw. What do you mean by that?

Maybe other cultures and the way other people live, and the things that we have that they don't have, that type of thing. The beautiful buildings that were left, the beautiful cathedrals that you saw.

I remember going to mass-- and this was back in Africa. We went into mass and we sat down. But you don't do that because everybody just has their own pew. Their own chair, they bring their own chair, and their own kneeling bench, and so I was in somebody else's seat.

They just sort of-- it wasn't the same in England. I don't remember going to church in any place else except there. We went in churches and saw the cathedrals, some of the cathedrals and things. Those were beautiful things.

Did they hold services every week?

No. We didn't have a chaplain.

Oh, you didn't.

Not a Catholic chaplain. We had the Protestant minister. And if I remember correctly, they had a mass in Gusen that they hadn't had one in years. And everybody went that could. All the inmates went. Never can think of what to call them.

Patients or survivors.

Is there anything you want to say?

I can't think of anything.

What do your kids ask you about from that period?

Well, they look back at my scrapbook, and the pictures I have in the scrapbook, and things like that. Ma, did you look like this 50 years ago? Hard to think you changed that much. I think the only person hasn't changed is Sherry. I would know her any place. But the rest-- oh, maybe Doddie, too. And Feldhusen. The three of them. The rest, you don't recognize.

Time does strange things.

Doesn't it?

Good.

OK.

Great.

Good.

Oh, this is the end of the tape one, side B. Has been Mary M. Wood.

You want the serial number there? Do you take the serial number or no? 10, seven, two, three, four, six, three. Don't ask me my social security number, but that I know.

Oh, you remember that one.

Well, you had to write it every time you wrote a letter or anything.

This is July 14, 1995, West Park, New York.