

OK. This is Neenah Ellis interviewing Clarice MacLeod on July 15th, 1995. This is the first side of that interview. And we are in West Park, New York.

Please tell me when and where were you born.

I was born in Philadelphia, New York in 1970. And why I emphasize the New York? Everybody thinks it's PA. OK, sorry.

Tell me a little bit about the town you were raised in and your family. Tell me something about your family.

We moved when I was about three years old so I don't remember much about the town. But I do remember it was mostly farmland and they were just building the roads. And there was no throughway or any of this. And then we moved about seven miles south to a little place called Evans Mills. And that's where I went to school and was brought up and graduated in '35. That's about it.

When did you decide you wanted to be a nurse?

I think when I was in my senior year in high school. We didn't have much choices in that time as to what you could do as a nurse, or secretary, or teacher. And I can remember a lecture that our professor gave. And he said, do what you think you can do for the most people. And I think that's what decided me to be a nurse. No special reason, really.

When did you go to nursing school?

1935, graduated '38.

Where at?

At House of the Samaritan in Watertown, which is another small city in upstate New York.

And what did you do when you got out of nursing school in 1938?

I did general duty and I did private duty. And in following years, I worked with the Visiting Nurse Association. Well, I guess that was after I came back from the service. Well, that's about it [INAUDIBLE], really.

When and why did you decide to go in the service?

I had nothing to hold me at home. I knew that nurses were needed. I knew that I could be covered at home by older nurses who had children and whatever. And I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't go. And I felt I could be of some help, I guess. That's the only reason.

You know other people that were going in?

No.

No?

No.

Where did you find out about overseas service for nurses? Something you just thought of?

Well, that was after-- No, that was after I had gone through basic training. And they just sent us there, you had no idea what you would be doing, you know. No, they just all of a sudden said, you're going overseas. And you accepted that. Well, I think you probably expected it at one time or another. But no, no special.

Where did you do your basic?

Atlantic City, New Jersey.

What was that like?

Hard. Did a lot of marching up and down the boardwalk.

Marching on the boardwalk?

Oh, yes. But they were very strict, I think, because you were in basic training. But enjoyed it, really. Enjoyed it.

What other kinds of things do you remember from basic training?

Nothing much, really. I can't remember in that we went any place special. I can't even remember what the meals were.

Must not have been too good if you can't remember.

Or else it must have been real good, yeah. I don't know how to answer you. No, really.

And when did you go overseas, and how did you find out about that time?

Oh, let's see, we had-- I was sent to South Carolina. Well, I guess it was then that they told us that we were preparing to go overseas. Because we had to learn how to pitch tents and dig trenches and all this. And I think it was about November, maybe, they told us that we were going overseas. And we-- I can't remember what date we got on the boat. But I remember we arrived December 22nd in Scotland. And that's about it.

Do remember very much of the crossing? About the boat or what it was like on the boat?

Yes. There were 19 of us in a state room that normally held two people. I remember we were told that we might be-- that the Germans were hitting with submarines. Might do damage to our boat. And we had to sleep one night fully dressed and with our helmets on. We were told that. Life on the Queen Elizabeth was just casual because everything certainly was different than it was in peace time.

Was it crowded?

Mm-hmm. Very.

And then you landed in?

22nd of December, we landed in Greenock, Scotland. From there, we went to England. Altrincham, I think it was. And then from there, we just move in with the flow. We went to France, and went to Belgium, and then on to Germany.

And when you were in Germany, then, you were treating men who were coming back from battle?

Yes, some. But mostly when they were patients right off the field because we were the first unit to get them right off the field. And we were seeing some. And sometimes, we had to do temporary duty at other hospitals.

And what was your specific job? Were you in a ward or an operating room?

I was in the operating room, anesthetist.

Anesthetist.

So I'm kind of lost as to-- I feel kind of sorry because I like the contact with patients. And of course, I didn't have much of that when I was working there.

So they would come in and you'd knock them out. And that would be it.

That's about it. That's about it.

And did you ever get much contact with them later?

No.

Or were you just doing that over and over and over?

No. In fact, there were very few times that you would ever-- well, and maybe you were so busy that you didn't. And I don't know, but you didn't contact them on the ward after they left the operating room as a rule.

What kind of anesthesia was used?

Nitrous oxide and sodium penathol. I can't remember about either. I think probably that was initially. Started a patient out maybe on ether, but didn't give it to him for the full surgical operation.

Why was that?

Well, because it's a little bit too heavy, I think, for a long operation. Or else it was the doctor's choice. I don't remember. Don't know.

And that was at the same job you always did? Did people rotate in and out of different jobs?

No. Prior to that, I had worked in hospitals before we went overseas. Like I was at Halloran General in Staten Island. I was at Mason General, which was a psychiatric hospital in New York. No, anesthesia was only when I was overseas.

And did you have special training for that?

No. The anesthetist taught me what I knew. I had worked in the operating before, but not as an anesthetist when I was working.

Doing that job, do you stay there in the operating room during the whole procedure?

A surgery?

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

You do. What do you do during the surgery?

You monitor the patient. I mean, that's a constant thing. You have to do that until a surgery's over. And of course, you'd go from one patient to the next. I mean, it was like today. They schedule their surgery.

So you were constantly monitoring the vital signs.

Were those quick surgeries?

No, a lot of repair surgeries, mine explosions, and fractures. No, I wouldn't call them-- I think maybe what you mean is you did the initial thing there and sent them on to a major general hospital. Yes, that's true, I thought. Yeah.

But they weren't necessarily like an emergency room situation, where you just--

Well, yes and no. They were emergencies because they had to be done right away because they were right off the field. Yes, I guess probably you would say they were emergencies, yeah. But then they were sent to wards afterwards until they could be transported to a major hospital.

And what was it like when you were off duty? What kinds of things did you do?

Just I guess walking. You'd play ball. You would read. You'd do anything to pass your time away. I don't think there was any specific thing. And like I said, you made your own fun. Because you naturally didn't watch TV, and listen to the radio, and all that jazz. No, I just-- camaraderie, I guess, with your roommates.

You all get along?

Oh, yeah. I can't remember ever having an argument with-- that's what I said. It's a good training, good learning.

Being in the service, you mean?

Well, yes. But I mean, even in the hospital. You see, when you're training to be a nurse, you're pretty much in with a lot of other nurses. And you learn. Of course, most of us knew how to get along with other people. But I think being in close proximity, you are more aware of it maybe. But you asked what we did and I don't even know what we did.

But the time went fast. And we couldn't be out by ourselves. You had to-- like when we were at the concentration camp there in Germany, you had to have an armed guard. And there weren't enough available because they were guarding the camp. So you didn't get to see too much.

Did you mingle with the men at all very much?

Yes, we had parties for the enlisted men. And you'd go to the officers' lounge for either eating, or having a drink, or whatever. Yeah, you mingled. Not all the time, but yeah.

And how long do you figure you were in Germany?

Not very long.

You were there for VE Day? Yep. I remember that one. I think we might have luck-- I think we might have gone in there. I know at Easter time, we were in France or in Belgium, on or the other. So it might have been May till I'd say maybe sometime in July. So it wasn't very long, really.

We were there for the liberation. Were there for-- well, they liberated the camp. And that's when our colonel said that we could go. We were left behind. All the boys went over to liberate the men.

This is the 113th, we didn't say this.

This is no, 131st.

131st, I'm sorry.

Yeah, 131st.

It was-- the full title is?

131st Evacuation Unit.

And they split off and they went ahead to Austria and left you behind?

No, we were already-- they went-- oh, where were we? I think we were like in [PLACE NAME], and they left and went to Austria. And no, there were still some there because they couldn't leave women alone in that area. But they-- most of them went and liberated them. I think I have a thing downstairs that tells about that.

And our colonel said, when he came back, that he was not-- what's the word? Forcing any of the nurses to go. We could go if we wanted to. And everybody but one elected to go. And of course, when we got there, it was quite a sensation.

Do you remember arriving? What was that like?

Well, we all went up in trucks, of course. And when we got there, there were patients intermingled. Some of them were dead and some of them were still living. All in one room. There might have been some bunks in there. And I guess several maybe in a bunk. But I think the sad part was that some were alive and some were dead.

And we had a fine chaplain who buried them, put crosses on everyone. In fact, I have pictures of that somewhere downstairs. But that's about that, I guess.

And what did you do there? What was your assignment while you were there?

That's when I worked in the operating room and when we would get-- well, you had to do while patients were there what necessarily had to be done. But you'd also be getting patients from outside in the interim. I mean, they were always coming in. But we did do some work on some of the patients that were there, as far as-- well, we called them patients. They were really prisoners.

Did you set up your tent hospital there? Is that what you were working in?

We were-- no. We were housed in houses, regular houses. In fact, the nicest place we stayed. But in the hospital itself, they were like long, wooden-- they weren't tents. We were set up in tents three or four different times. But when we were there, this was a long, wooden building.

And the name of this camp was Gusen?

Gusen.

A subcamp of?

Mauthausen.

Do you have any sense of how many people were there? How many when you got there? How many former prisoners there were?

No. And I don't know whether I have a record of that.

Would it have been hundreds or thousands?

Oh, hundreds, I'm sure. Thousands, no, I don't think so. Because a lot of them-- well, I say a lot. Some of them had just taken off. Heavens knows where they went. But when they were liberated, they just went. But there were still a lot of them there.

And you would then, every day, go into the surgery, into the operating room? And that was your job. What kinds of

injuries were you seeing? Or what kinds of things were?

Well, like I said, mine blow-ups or whatever. Not too much gunfire problems. Sometimes you'd get a patient in who'd been shot or whatever. But a lot that I can remember were mines.

Land mines?

Land mines that exploded by people walking over them or whatever.

And this was after the fighting had stopped, though. Or were these people who were injured before?

No, this was-- the fighting had stopped, yeah.

But people were still--

Still coming in because those landmines weren't deactivated for a long time, even after we left, I'm sure.

And what about-- I'd heard that there were people in that camp who had been experimented on surgically by the Germans. Did you see any of that?

I read that. No, no.

You never saw that, people who had--

But I believe from what I read that that probably happened, yes. I think, too, that the major one I read about was Dachau. And of course, that was earlier than when we went over there, too. No, I read a lot. But no, not that I am aware of.

Did you get out and see much of the camp itself? Did you see, for example, there was a quarry. There were a lot of prisoners--

Yes, when we went to work, there was a long line of steps or whatever and a quarry. And many mornings, when we go, naturally, to have breakfast and whatever, and go to work, the Russians or the Germans had put a whole mess of stones in front. So they had to be removed before the nurses could walk up to get to the camp.

So you had to go up those stairs? Did you know at the time that prisoners had been forced to walk up and down those stairs? Did you know about that?

No, I didn't know about that.

And the crematorium, did you see that?

Yes, we saw that. We did not see it op-- I didn't see it in operation. Before we arrived there, there was the stench of the crematorium, which was sad. But as far as being in use when we were there, I never saw that. I don't know. But I'm sure that it had been used.

Were you aware of local people in Linz coming there for any reason to the camp to work or just to see it?

No, not to be aware-- daily. They used to bring in a truckload of personnel that they would go and pick up off the street.

US Army would do that?

Would do that. Local, I mean people from our working area. And many times, the patients would recognize some of these people that were picked up as being assessors, abuse of people, which we weren't aware of until this-- you know,

they started coming in.

No, as far as viewers, I can't ever remember people just coming to look around. But that could happen, I suppose. But I don't know. I wouldn't think so at that stage of the game.

It's pretty early.

Yeah, I don't think there would have been people coming in just to view the area, no.

But you mentioned that some of the patients would recognize people. And do you remember any specific incident like that when somebody said something?

No. I think, probably, I was told this, because I was not on the wards. And probably, some of my nurse friends told me about this. No, I did not see this.

Yeah, you were in the operating room all the time. Right. What about some of the people-- the former inmates there who were well enough to walk around. Did you see those people?

Yes. They were skin and bones. Well, many, many days, they would-- like when we went there, we naturally fed them. There were two doors to each one of those barracks. They would come in one door and go out the other door. So they were really overfed.

But they would take their food and bury it outside of the barracks. Because they thought sometime that they might need it. They didn't know that they were liberated. They didn't know too much. You could see, in a week's time, how they improved and all that. But they really were mentally and physically-- I don't know the word to describe it.

But they would bury their food in the ground.

Bury their food in hopes that when they could get out of there-- I suppose they constantly had in their mind that they were going to get out, you know. Or would get out some way or another. And they would bury their food so that they would have something to take with them.

Until we finally got them educated that they could have food every day, and three times a day, and that they didn't have to do that. That they were liberated. But here, again, where could they go? They had no place to go, really.

Did you know at the time where those people were or who they were? Did you know if they were Jewish people or not? Did you know anything about them? Did you learn after a time went by?

No. I'm sure that whatever records-- and they did have some records. I'm sure the others could tell you about this. Like Colonel Case, who was our chaplain, and who did lot of this.

Maybe a lot of the nurses that worked on the wards could tell you this. Because they certainly got what information they could from them, and names, and numbers if they had any numbers. But I'm sure a lot of them didn't even have names or numbers, and probably couldn't remember.

I know that there were, I think, more Polish-- maybe they were Polish Jewish, I don't know, than there were actually just Jewish people. You see, this was quite a while after the Holocaust, really. Holocaust started in, what, '42? '43? And we were there in early '45. So a lot of this happened before we even arrived, I'm sure, having watched the movie.

You learned about it afterwards.

In about five mi-- Excuse me.

When did you get out of the service? Do you remember? October '45, I had a separation. That was-- yeah, October '45.

And sometime in '51, I was recalled.

Really?

Because I didn't realize that when you were separated, that you were supposed to take two weeks' training every year or they could recall you. Which they did.

What is a separation?

And at that time, I was married.

I don't know the word separation.

You were just separated. Nobody-- at the time I got out, nobody actually had a so-called discharge. Everybody was just separated. You got your discharge later. And I think at one time, there was a choice, too, whether you were discharged or just separated. And I think, for some reason, I chose not to be discharged. And I think that I did this because thinking of retirement.

Well, I was uneducated. And in order to do this, you had to spend two weeks training a year, which I didn't know. So they recalled me to make up, I suppose, for the time that I should have spent. Or I say should have, yeah, I guess it would be. And at that time, I was married.

But I was stationed in Massachusetts. And eventually, I got transferred to Fort Drum, which is very-- 10 miles within my home. I could live at home, except when I was on call in the OR. And that was probably two or three nights a week that I had to stay on call. And the rest of the time, I could live at home and had it made.

That was pretty nice. Yeah.

Yes.

Well, it's been 50 years. It's a long time. And I know that memories fade. But what sticks with you about that service that you did? Especially at Gusen, at that concentration camp.

I think it was very important. And I'm not sorry a bit that we went, or that I went, no. I think it was necessary. I think it was a good experience, a good training. I think that I did a part to help. I guess that's it.

And how do you think you're different as for having witnessed what you witnessed?

I don't think I'm any different than a lot of people. I don't understand it. I don't understand how it could be done. I don't understand a lot of things that are going on today, like in Bosnia and wherever. I cannot believe that some, one man, could be so cruel as Mr. Hitler.

But that's the way it was. There will always be wars, there will always be people like him. So I don't know. You say how different? I guess I was more educated in that line. And that's about all. I just never gave it any thought before. And I still can't believe that those things happened. But they did.

You never gave it any thought. What do you mean? Before what?

Before I went in the service, I never-- I guess I probably was aware of it reading the papers. But never-- maybe then, I just didn't believe it. I don't know. I don't know. But never as aware as I was when I was there and witnessed was we did.

Since that time, have you had people-- have you been in conversations with people who don't believe that it happened?



No. No. In fact, my niece did a theme when she was a senior. And at that time, there had been a lot of news in the paper about people not believing it happened. And she had cut some of those out, sent them to me.

But no, I have not talked with anybody who said it couldn't have happened. No. I think everybody felt that it was true. And maybe not to the severity of it. But they-- because I don't think you could believe it until you saw it, really. Except if you had family or whatever. You know, then it would be a different story. But.

OK. Anything else you want to say?

No, I can't think of anything. I'm sure that a lot of these girls that you have interviewed could offer you a lot more than I can as far as that. Because I wasn't in contact with them.

Yeah, some people were working on wards and had a lot more.

That made a lot of difference, yes.

Yeah, they have different memories. Yeah. OK, thank you. Let me say, this is the end of the interview with Clarice MacLeod. July 15th, 1995. This is Neenah Ellis in West Park, New York.