

Tape # 27

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DONOR: DAVID PORTIGAL  
INTERVIEWER: HAROLD SOSNOWICZ  
DATE: APRIL 4, 1988

approx. running time 45 minutes

Tape Footage: Background

1-374 David was born in Winnipeg on July 31, 1912 just off Euclid Street in the north end. He grew up on Grove Street and attended Norquay School, then Aberdeen for Junior High, and St. John's High School.  
He then attended university

1939

In 1939 David was working as a geologist at a gold mine property in Eastern Manitoba. It was a tough time for mining. David discovered he could make some money with a camera. Photography was his hobby.

During the 1939 Royal Tour he was taken on by the Free Press and had his photos published for the first time.

375-804 In the early days of the war David worked at the Free Press as a cub reporter. He had also studied chemistry and was working as a chemist at the Manitoba Sugar Plant.

RCAF

When an anti-semitic supervisor did not give David an expected raise and also threatened not to renew his draft exemption, David went out and signed up with the RCAF. He was immediately given trade signing because of his photography.

David was first sent to Brandon and then other prairie stations, including Portage la Prairie, where he taught photography to air observers.

Then 200 photographers were needed to man the photographic sections overseas. These sections were designed to service the Canadian Reconnaissance Unit in Europe.

Overseas

David went overseas for this at the end of 1943.

805-1216 Coincidentally both the dispatch depot clerk and the officer in charge were Jewish Winnipeggers.

David was chosen to be one of five news photographers for the RCAF's London Unit. He was stationed at London Headquarters until after D-Day. The stories he covered were not thrilling.

Then David was transferred to the Yorkshire bombing stations in late summer 1944. In early September he joined the #5 Mobile Field Photographic Section in

Belgium. This section serviced the 39 Canadian Reconnaissance Wing and did all the reconnaissance work for the British 2nd Army.

The unit followed the allies big push through Belgium and Holland over the Rhine into Germany.

December 31, 1944 was the last big attack on David's unit.

The big push began the end of February 1945 and ended with the German collapse in early May.

### Bergen-Belsen

1217-1929 When the war was over David visited Bergen-Belsen and took photos of inmates both dead and alive. Others took down the addresses of inmates' relatives in America to let them know who had survived.

On April 13, 1985 the Free Press published some of David's Belsen photos.

When David's unit arrived at Belsen they were not allowed in because of the danger of typhoid. They were allowed to speak to anyone along the barbed wire fence. These were mostly women in relatively good shape because they were recent arrivals.

David is good friends with Father Izyk who he first met at Belsen.

David was one of four photographers allowed on top of a British truck as it drove into the camp. There were big white sand fields with huge rectangular pits about 100 feet by 40 feet and 20 feet deep. These were loaded with dead and emaciated bodies. Bodies were still being dumped from trucks even when David was there.

There was no identification of these people.

David spoke to some women in Yiddish. Most had just arrived after surviving marches. The unit gave out chocolate bars and cigarettes, and the inmates were very grateful. Then David returned to his unit at Luneburg.

1930-2621 The prisoners main concern is that the soldiers get word out to their kin that they had survived.

Bergen-Belsen had no markers, so it was not discovered until several days after the war ended.

David had heard of atrocities and gas chambers during the war. Many POWs who had escaped Germany told stories.

At Luneburg air strip where David was stationed thousands of ex-POWs were repatriated. One friend of David's was reunited with his brother-in-law this way.

David's unit was equipped with everything, even air-conditioning in case they went into the desert.

### After the War

20 years after the war David and his wife returned to Holland and met with some families with whom he had corresponded since the war.

A few weeks after the end of the war all Jewish servicemen were invited to attend a wedding of two former Belsen inmates. This is where David first met Father Izyk.

One day in the early 70s Father Izyk came into David's studio to have some work done. He looked at David and asked him if he had been at Bergen-Belsen.

2623-2750 When David returned to Winnipeg after the war he opened a commercial photo studio with one of his fellow RCAF photographers. They covered many news stories.

David has given his photographs of Bergen-Belsen to the Winnipeg Jewish Community Council.

David was there and did see for himself what happened.

The worse thing he remembers is driving around and looking at all the graves and the number of bodies. It is inconceivable that man can be like that.