

Interview slate one coming up.

George Salton. This is camera one, marker one.

Should I start?

Yes.

All right. I was liberated in spring of 1945. And I was by that time a prisoner in various concentration camps for over three years, and it was the 10th camp. The name of the camp was Wobbelin. It was a camp that apparently the Germans didn't finish. When we arrived there, the buildings were not finished. They were no floors, and a few barracks, and the windows. We slept on the sand. The place was very disorganized.

It was based-- but it was springtime. It was a time of double pain, because inside, the discipline and organization and supply of food were deteriorating, the madness and the evil was increasing, while nature placed leaves on the trees outside of the wires. And birds were singing and flowers appeared in greater numbers, as if to mock the many starving and dying prisoners inside the camp.

There was no work there. There was really very little organization. The German SS men still, however, maintained a certain process, calling us out every morning for a assembly to count us. It was not meaningful anymore because so many people died every night that the count didn't mean anything. And nevertheless, we who were still alive and able got up every morning and appeared for the assembly and for count. We did it because we are afraid. I suppose in those days only the dead were not afraid. We were.

And so it happened one day-- and I believe it was the beginning of May. I know now that it was the 1st of May, but at that time I believed that it is the beginning of May. At one of those assemblies, it was announced that the prisoners in this camp, Camp Wobbelin-- in which there must have been about 4,000 or 5,000 prisoners that were still alive-- they were to be placed on a train to be evacuated again. Mind you that during those late days of the war, as the fronts were moving and advancing, we were being evacuated from camp to camp.

May I?

And so it happened at about noon or 10 o'clock that day, we were placed in boxcars, some 100 or 80, or 120 people to a boxcar. It was obviously very crowded. The train was-- well, let me tell you, but the camp is-- all camps was surrounded by double fence. And that in the railroad line was there waiting boxcars, when an area between the two fences-- is significant as the story evolves.

We were on that train the whole night, hungry and miserable. There was some random shootings from the guards which surrounded us. And then by next morning, again, as I remember it very well, about 10:00, the doors were opened and the prisoners were saying to other prisoners that the locomotive did not show up. And therefore, there are some doubts about us being transported to some new destination.

Later that morning, we were asked to-- we were ordered to leave the boxcars, line up in the area in front of the boxcars, right in front of the fence and the gate that led to the inner camp, where the camp was, with instructions that was orders. I need to remember that, orders, barked, orders that all the Jews should step forward.

I would estimate that at that time, among the 6,000-- or 4,000 to 6,000 prisoners, there must have been a few hundred Jews, maybe 400 Jews. Most of us, being sufficiently experienced and knowing what to expect-- most of us Jews, I should say-- tried to ignore this order. Some people who really didn't care step forward, others were being singled out in this commotion by prisoners who are not Jewish. And then in the midst of that confusion and shouting and fear accompanied by shouts and beatings, there was a-- we heard the cannon fire, artillery cannon fire, and some place close by.

And all of us looked in the direction of the sound, from which the sound came, down the corridor that the railroad track cuts through the forest. And in the distance, we could see a tank, a kind of a green tank. And I quite frankly didn't know and didn't care at that time whether it was a German or Russian or American tank. We didn't know exactly where we were and which part of Germany, and we did not know at all how the war was coming, even though we knew that there were changes because of the movement of the prisoners from camp to camp.

And there was this tank, and it was surrounded by smoke, which I suppose was the smoke emitted by the cannon. And it stood there on the horizon, almost-- I remember seeing it as some kind of a prehistoric animal, ready to snarl or attack. And I was-- and most of us who could see it were stunned by that sight.

And the Germans, of course, reacted to it very quickly. They opened the inner gate, the gate to the inner camp, and made all of us move, walk into the camp, gave up the idea of singling out Jews. They did hold back the-- the German trustees were called kapos who were basically the administrators of the day-to-day workings of the camp. And we just went in, and there was nothing more. There was no-- the tank didn't appear, there were no additional cannon fire. It would have been about 10:00 or 11:00 when this happened, in the morning.

The German guards continued to occupy the towers that surrounded the electric wire around the fence, for reasons which were their own. They continue random shooting into the camp. Prisoners were being shot. And those of us who were inside searched out, and I in particular searched out, a position between the barracks where I was not in the line of fire. And some food was available for stealing because the kapos who in the past protected the supply of potatoes or cabbage or whatever was there were no longer inside the camp. So there we were, not knowing what's going to happen.

And clearly, I did not anticipate liberation. The whole-- I must confess, that the whole notion of being free, of living a life that was my own, was outside of my expectation. I have been in camp since-- I was a prisoner since I was 14. I have been under German control since I was 11. I just didn't know what it meant to be able to decide when to get up, or what to do, or-- the whole notion of liberation and freedom was not something I was counting on. And I had no idea and no expectation that this was the day when the thing that I had forgotten about may happen, that I may be liberated and free.

So there I was, sitting behind a barrack with other prisoners. Mind you, in that camp there were hundreds and hundreds of unburied bodies, because the whole process of managing the camp has stopped. And so there we were sitting behind the barrack. I think I had two or three potatoes. And some prisoners started fires, little fires. And I had my bowl that all prisoners carried, and it was essential to have in order to receive rations of soup whenever it was available. And I tried to cook these potatoes.

And time passed. I really didn't think about anything very much. When I noticed out of the corner of my eye, in the distance among other barracks, people running, just individual prisoners I could see running, all in a certain direction. And I still had a survival instinct even though I was by that time very tired, and my life was ebbing, and I was on the verge of becoming a Muselmann, if you know what it is, someone who no longer really cares about surviving. Still, the instinct was there, and I saw these people running in this one direction. And I wanted to know why. Maybe there was food, maybe something good was happening, and I wanted to take advantage of it. Maybe there was something bad, and I needed to know about it to try to avoid it.

Mind you, as a youngster, I survived the many years of concentration camps and many selections by making myself invisible. 15-year-old boys were not supposed to stay alive in camps because they were not old enough to be productive workers.

We have to reload.

That's what "cut" means?

Yeah. Yeah.

Got it. Right here.

Two.

So there I was sitting, hidden against one of the barracks, protecting myself from the line of fire, when I noticed people running. In the distance between the barracks, I could see individuals in their white and blue striped prison uniforms running. And I initially wanted to ignore it because it was safe and warm sitting in the sun over there, but my survival instincts made me want to find out why the people were running and what was happening.

There were maybe good things that were happening. Maybe there was food, and I needed to know about it to take advantage of it. They were maybe bad things that I needed to know about to avoid. That was the instinct of a prisoner who, no matter what the circumstances, still wanted to survive.

So after noticing the movement of people and the running, I followed. I followed between the barracks, moved on, and came to an area of the camp where the latrines, toilets, were located. It was a special area, not only because the toilets were there, but because this is the place where prisoners who are about to die for some strange reasons went to die. And there were mountains of bodies and many dead people.

And so I ran in that direction. And as I came onto that place, I notice many prisoners yelling and screaming and jumping and dancing. And there, standing among them, were seven giants, young people. They must have been 18 or 19, American soldiers. There were seven or eight of them standing inside the camp. Apparently, they cut the wire and came into the camp.

They were bewildered by us, wild and unkempt and dirty and, I'm sure, smelly people, jumping and dancing and trying to embrace them and kiss them. And I did, too. I also joined the crowd and yelled and screamed, and somehow knew that the day of liberation has come.

It was a strange feeling for me, however, because as I remember, on the one hand, I was overwhelmed by this unexpected and un hoped for encounter of freedom. But at the same time, what was happening was outside of me. I really-- I didn't know what to make of it. I knew I was free, but I didn't count on it. I somehow didn't know what it meant. And I knew it was great, but I was overjoyed because all people around me were overjoyed and were singing and dancing. But I was 17. I was free, but what it meant, I wasn't sure.

The soldiers were there for a few minutes. They were patrols, whose job, I'm sure-- whose assignment was not to liberate the camp, but to march along a certain road to some destination. And after 10 minutes or 15 minutes, they left. They just moved on through the wire.

We looked around incidentally during that celebration and wonderful feeling. And the Germans were gone. The towers were empty. There were no soldiers, there were no guards. And the Americans have left. And some of us who remembered the stories that our parents told us from the first war, when the Austrians and the Russians kept moving back and forth across little towns and advancing and retreating, some of us said the Germans may come back. So we left.

Some groups of people, the Frenchman, I saw arrange themselves into a marching order and walked out of the gate. And five of us Jewish young men who knew each other from home left through the hole in the fence into the forest, not to search for freedom, or for-- but to hide, because we thought that the Germans might come back. So while we were free, and while the Germans were gone, we were not really free, because we-- freedom didn't come like a sunrise where one day we were in the dark, the next day there was light and warmth and nurturing and rejoicing and celebration. Freedom came as something that happened, but did not affect us immediately.

So we went into the forest, not knowing what to do. I remember there were some guns and pistols laying around in the forest. Obviously, the Germans were retreating already at that time. We tried to carry some of these weapons with us, expecting that we may have to hide in the forest and defend ourselves, but quite frankly, the weapons were too heavy for us to carry.

And we came to a little town-- the town's name is Ludwigslust-- only to discover as we walked into the town-- I think

looking for some shelter, maybe for something to eat-- that the town was still in German hands. I remember us walking, coming around the corner, and on the opposite side of the street, there were two German officers with a woman walking, and they were still in uniform and armed. And they looked at us and we looked at them, and they moved on, and we jumped over a hedge and hid in a little shack that apparently was used by a painter to store his paint. And we were just hiding over there, waiting for darkness to leave the town and hide in the forest again.

So here we are liberated, but really did not recognize then. And towards the evening, as the sun started setting, American GIs came walking into town. And we were liberated. And that-- we were liberated. We then knew that the times of oppression and pain and beatings were behind us.

And rather than saying, me, let me talk about myself, I really didn't know what the future held. I recognized that most likely I was alone. I recognized that most likely my parents did not survive. I recognized that I was really unprepared. I was obviously unprepared for freedom and self-sufficiency. At the-- and I was driven only to contact my relatives in the United States in the hopes that my brother may have survived. And when the family was separated back in early '42, my father instructed all of us to contact our relatives in New York, because this is how we would find each other.

So that's how it happened, a day of pain and misery, and then a low-key development that snuck up on us. Wonderful day, a day I shall never forget, a day I remember with great joy and great pleasure. But it wasn't a day that held the kind of excitement that one would expect to see in the movies. It was a day when freedom came, liberation came, unannounced and unexpected.

OK. We have about two minutes left. Did--

Well, let me talk a little bit about what happened next. Once the Americans came to town in Ludwigslust, the five of us decided to-- we didn't know what to do. We really stayed in this little shack in which paint was stored, slept, and went around to the American-- to the kitchens that cooked for the American soldiers-- which by then occupied the town-- and begged for some food. There were really no arrangements. And I'm not complaining. I'm just recognizing there were no arrangements to take care of us or the hundreds of other prisoners that were liberated then in the camp, in Wobbelin.

American soldiers were quite generous and helpful and sympathetic. They gave us food, they gave us whatever they had, including Hershey bars. And after a few days of that existence, Americans then started making arrangements to ship the various liberated prisoners to their homes. Where we were liberated was to become the Russian zone, and the Americans were, of course, expecting to retreat from that area on the other side of the river.

So the French were sent home to the West, and the Italians went down South. And the Poles and the Ukrainians, the Czechs, were shipped East. We were-- while we are Jewish, we were still Polish.

One day, the Americans gathered us from this little shack and put us on a truck with other people of Polish origin, and sent East towards the Russians whose lines were right outside of town. And the Russians didn't want to accept us, didn't want to, whatever the reasons were. The guards standing there on the roadside did not allow the truck to pass, so we were brought back. The British came and put us on their trucks and took us to a town called Lubeck.

And I must tell you, on that road something happened that was a part of the liberation. And I think it was the day when I really realized that the--

Let's wait.

OK.

We have to put--

OK.

After the Russians refused to pass the truck with people from Poland and turned us back, by some arrangement, British

soldiers showed up with trucks. And we were, all of us, placed on a number of trucks driven by British soldiers and taken West towards a town of Lubeck. Obviously, into that part of Germany that was to be British zone and not the Russian zone, or the Eastern zone.

Something happened on this trip that I remember was great emotion. Because even though it happened maybe a week or eight days after the liberation, it was that punctuation mark that really made me realize that I'm whole again. Or, I can at least hope to be whole again.

We were sitting on the back of the truck as the trucks were moving. And behind us was, obviously, another truck with two British soldiers and their uniforms driving that truck. And the truck, because of various obstacles, the trucks would stop every once in a while and move. And the few of us that were sitting in that truck spoke Yiddish to each other, Jewish Yiddish.

And at one point, the drivers of the truck behind us started blowing the horn. The truck stopped. And they came out running, speaking Yiddish to us, telling us that they were Jews, and being surprised and happy that they had found Jewish survivors, because somehow, they didn't expect to find any.

And I remember the feeling of seeing people in uniform with authority, with guns, with hands on the wheel that could make a truck turn left or right, that were Jewish. And it was the moment when I realized that I was equal. It was the moment when I realized that the days of humiliation and fear, and the days when I was treated as somehow subhuman, were behind me, because it was possible for me, it was attainable for me to feel that there were no limits, and possible for me to really understand that I was free.

Maybe that's how long it took for me to really understand what liberation was. That's how long it took for me to really comprehend that liberation was more than just being able to go out of the camp and cross the barbed wire. Liberation was something that had to happen in me. I had to realize and understand that liberation was also a feeling of sufficiency and equality, and that that happened that day with the British soldiers.

Anyway, life went on we. We were settled in a DP camp in--

Let me ask you a couple things.

OK. One--

Sandra, you heard the beeps?

Yeah.

What?

Did you at some point-- did an American soldier share his rations with you? Can you describe--

Yes. I'm obviously going to back in time. On May 2nd, the evening of May 2nd, which was the day of our liberation, that evening, as we were hiding in this little shack hoping to be undetected, to be able to somehow escape in the darkness back into the forest, the American soldiers marched in, and we were liberated. And we just stayed there and did not leave the shack.

And the following day or two-- which I, who was very weak and very skinny, and I'm sure looked terrible, I spent my days sitting in the sun and resting and trying to warm up and trying to recover. Young American soldiers-- who did not look young to me; they looked like giants or angels-- would come by and give me food, give me a bar of chocolate, or share some food that they had.

Yes, that's what happened. I'm sure they felt sympathy for this little teenager who was half alive and half dead. And I'm sure they recognized that we deserved pity. I'm sure they also recognized that we may be one of the reasons why they

risk their lives for the Germans.

And also, you saw children for the first time?

Oh, you are-- you have seen some of my other stories. Yes.

When the American soldiers left Wobbelin, and some of us were concerned that there might be a repetition of the stories that we had from our parents of what happened during the first war, and were concerned that the Germans might come back, we left. We walked through the forest where there were many-- there were weapons and abandoned trucks.

And as we walked through the forest, came out into a clearance, or a little side road, and there were refugees there. I don't know whether they were German-- I expect they were Germans. They could have been Lithuanians, or whatever-- wagons with horses and lots of refugees, with women and children.

And I remember walking and seeing two young children. They might have been like my grandchildren now, three or four or two. And I was surprised, how a child-- to see a child, to see how a child looked, because I haven't seen a child for three or four years. I knew that children exist, of course, but I haven't seen a child.

And it was a special experience to see a child, to remember how a child look. And to see how really beautiful and innocent they were. I was kind of like seeing a flower that one has only read about. And I remember going down on my knees in front these two little children and looking at them. And they were not afraid of me. I didn't touch them, but they were just there. And when I stood up, I did feel a little bit more human. I did feel that I-- the anger, and the desire maybe for revenge, have left me. I did feel a little bit more human.

I also felt sad, I must add, because I'm sure I realized that they were no Jewish children around. They were no Jewish children of the year of age three or four or five or seven or eight any place in central Europe. But, yes, I saw two children. There were more children, but I saw these two, and I looked at them. And I, to this day, I remember how surprised I was to see how a child look, because I forgot. And that experience was one of those many experiences that I'm sure was led me to a path of healing and becoming free.

You are, of course, have seen some of my other stories, and that's not fair.

When the Americans came into the camp, can you describe to me your physical condition, how you looked, what you weighed?

In that camp in Wobbelin-- which was, as I said, the 10th camp in my history, and I have been in camps by 10 years-- I have basically deteriorated very badly physically. I couldn't walk very well. My hip hurt me. And I was really very weak and reaching the state in which a prisoner no longer cared whether he or she survived.

Now, I did not reach that point. I still-- when I saw people running out of the corner of my eye, I still got up and went looking what was happening. But I was in very bad shape. And I think if I wasn't liberated, in a matter of days, I would have been one of those bodies that was laying in mountains of dead in front of the toilets. I would guess that I had maybe a week or 10 days left. And if I wasn't liberated and was not given additional food and was allowed to rest and sit in the sun, I wouldn't have recovered.

OK. We're very close to running out of film. And I think we should reload, and then move on to the DP camp.

OK.