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interview 2/14/95 Richard Seibel

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

[Something missing] the Germans or the Russians. And they ran across this concentration camp, Mauthausen, and they radioed in and said: We have come across something--we don't know what it is. It is like a big jail and there's people running all over. And I said: All right, you come back. So patrol returned to our headquarters. I reinforced the patrol, you must remember the war was still on, and I went back and I made a thorough inspection the best I could of Mauthausen, not knowing anything about a concentration camp. And made the inspection and I returned to our headquarters and I reported to our commanding general, Ge, Dager, and told him what it was. Along with that. there was two Americans in the camp, and one in particular, Lt. Jack Taylor, who was a member of the OSS, he told me what Mauthausen was. Then I told Gen. Dager what it was, and I went to get some lunch. And the telephone rang. It was Gen. Dager wanted to talk me. And he said: Dick, he said, I want you to return to Mauthausen and take supreme command of the camp. He said: You got a lousy job to do and he said, you cannot accept any orders from anybody, and he said, I have enough confidence in you to know that you will do what is right, and therefore you will take command and

stay there and run it. And that's how it all about and that's how I wound up in Mauthausen with the capture and the occupation of the camp.

Sandy: OK, now go back to when you first came in before you reported that---how people reacted to you.

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COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Well, actually and truly, it was unbelievable. I had never seen anything like this before in my life. I knew nothing of a concentration camp. We had heard of them, but that was the extent of it, and to see all of these bodies piled up and these starving sick people in the camp, I just couldn't imagine it. We we didn't know what, actually and truly, we didn't know what to do. And then, as I said, I returned, but my initial shock when we found about 700 bodies lying around and just piled up like wood, if you will. I couldn't believe it, I just couldn't believe it. The -man's inhumanity to man actually existed between men and women and the starving, sick, dead people in that camp--unbelievable.

I, I, I stop and think about and I I don't know how I ever managed to stay through it. It was, in my opinion, it was that awful.

Sandy: When you first came back, what did the people in the camp do to you?

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

They, they were so happy that we were there. Of course, we felt that we had done a tremendous thing by capturing the place and turning it to the Americans to solve a problem, if you will. But it it, I can't describe to you exactly--we were there and it was the second day. One of my people came into the headquarters and said: You better come quick into the main compound. He said: there's trouble. So I went out, and there are four people on the pavement with their throats cut. Which I had never seen before in my life. And the political unrest in the camp, I couldn't believe it because we were shocked actually and truly, that those people would be fighting among themselves, and I think it

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was primarily in control of the camp. I just couldn't believe it. Because, ah, here they are liberated people, and fighting among themselves. I don't know what they were fighting about, of course, it's it's a political, let's put it that way, and so, then from that time on, we become very strict. And we, we segregated camp, 18,000 people. We segregated the camp by nationality, and got all of the various nations nations living together rather than.... The Poles hated the Russians, and so they were locked up separately. And the other nations, like the Yugoslavians ah anybody who was who was there, I learned this from from the ah ah Yugoslavians. People who were the followers of King ? , King Peter and Mahailowisz, they were not accepted by the people who followed Tito. And therefore, there was great unrest among those people. And it was all political, and we were, we were really shocked. We thought, we here we are, the great white father has liberated these people from a concentration camp and here they are fighting among themselves. So we took some very severe action and put a stop to it--real quick.

Sandy: What about the initial reaction of the people when you first came in?

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Mixed emotions, really and truly. Some people, I know, would come up they want to touch me. Other people ah, were not particularly concerned. But after we were there a little while that all changed. And they they recognized us

as their saviors, if you will.

Sandy: What about--wasn't there one prisoner who had taken over an office. Tell me about that.

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COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Well, that's sort of one of the highlights. Ah. We came back. When we came back to occupy the camp and take it over, we went into the headquarters and first of all I must tell you, I speak only English and not too good at that, and here are all these different nationalities, and for me to correspond with them, no way. So there was a prisoner there, and he still lives in London. His name is Premislav Dobios, and correspond him, and it fat, I'll be seeing him in Austria in May. He volunteered to be my interpreter, He spoke 6 languages. And so, he was with me, and this fellow who was sitting behind the desk, and, I don't know, 3-4 other people behind him. I said by an interpreter, I said: What's he doing there? And he asked me. Well, he was a Russian major who was prisoner in the camp, and they had

taken over command of the camp. I said: Is that so? I said will you please inform him that this is in the American zone, and we are responsible for it and therefore we are in command of the camp. He wouldn't budge, he wouldn't move. I said: Please tell him again that we are responsible for this camp and that I am personally in command. He wouldn't move. So, I reached down and pulled out my 45 pistol and I cocked it and I shoved it right across the desk in his face. I said: Now you tell that s.o.b. to get out of here or I'm going to shoot him. Boy, they took off just like that and that was one of the highlights of our occupation. But they wouldn't budge, they wouldn't move at all until I used some force and that they understood.

Roll 2

Sandy: Tell me how bitter the enmities were and how much

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they wanted to bring their perpetrators to justice.

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Well, that was one thing that we had to all of the people down because under the stress and strain that they had been and all of a sudden they are free people, and it was very difficult for them to accept that fact. And they had certain rivalries, I'll say, in the camp, and we had to stop that because so many people would be hurt. And ah, the the feelings, we we were so surprised that they thought, we thought, that they would just bow down and scrape, you know, because here we had saved their lives and such. And so, we were trying to be good guys. if you will, and then we had to stop being good guys and be quite severe, if that's the proper word, to get them to understand that it was still a concentration camp and we were going to run it to the very best of our ability and take care of them and we expected cooperation from all of the people in the camp. And That's that that was our feeling and how we got them in line to be normal beings again.

Sandy: Tell me about how the Jews requested not be put with their countries.

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

All right. Ah, of course, I came from a very small town in Ohio. Population at that time was somewhere in the neighborhood of 9000 people, and we had two Jewish families. They weren't Jewish, as far as were concerned, they were members of the community and didn't recognize them as Jews. So my education in that respect was nil. One day, one of the boys came in and said: There is a prisoner out here who

wants to see you. And I said: All right, bring him in. And

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he came in and I said: What do you want? And he said: I am a Jew. And he said: I want to know why all the Jews in the camp are not together. I said: That a good question. I said: What's your nationality? He said: I'm a Hungarian. He spoke excellent English. I said of all the hell you people have been through before, being, ah, wearing the Star of David on your on your clothing and being treated as Jews and to severe punishment and severe actions, ah, that doesn't happen anymore. I said: You may be a Jew, but to me you are a Hungarian. I said: Judaism is your religion. He said: Yes. He said: I know, but I think all the Jews should be together. I said: Not according to my book. I said: You are a Hungarian, therefore, you will live with the Hungarians. And so finally, he accepted it. And this is kind of odd. When he got ready to leave, he thanked me, and he said: Sir. He said: Could you give me a couple of Hershey bars. And from that time on, the Jewish zionist organization from Switzerland, the chief of the zionist organization plus other members of the organization came to

Mauthausen and really put the stem on me to put the Jews all together. And I wouldn't do it. I said: Absolutely not. I said: I do not recognize these as Jews. I said: I recognize them as a nationality, and that's the way it is gonna be, and nobody is gonna change. And so they accepted it, but not willingly, I'll put it that way. So from that time on, we didn't have any problem, but I would not put Jews together because they had been living under horrible conditions isolated as Jews, and I wasn't gonna stand for that, cause I didn't believe in it.

Sandy: When you tried to bring order in that first month or so that you were there, what were your primary goals and problems?

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COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Well, I would say, that the big problem we had was the sickness that we had among the prisoners, primarily typhus and Tuberculosis. I had doctors with me who kept me very well posted and we deloused every prisoner in the camp with

DDT powder, and those people, and we called in two clearing hospitals, big hospitals, army hospitals, and anybody who was ill they were confined to a hospital. And so we hospitalized while we were there, we hospitalized 1000s of people and got them back on their feet and got and with proper medical treatment and such, got them to where they were normal beings again. We had about 1300 people die while we were there because they were beyond help. And we were giving them the very best medical attention that we could. Everybody was in the huge clearing hospital tents, and they were all on cots. So that we tried to give them the best. Then the other thing that was so important was food. And upon the advice of my doctor friends, told me what I could and couldn't do. so we started out giving them the same type of food they had been receiving, very watered potato soup. I mean it was just colored water, that's all. And so we did that for, I don't know, for or three days, and then we thinned it up a bit and made it a little thicker and then we had found a warehouse in Linz, Austria of dehydrated vegetables. And so we brought those in, so then we started adding some vegetables to the potato soup and that was lovely. They all liked it very much. And as it progressed, they went on solid food--boiled potatoes and vegetables, these dehydrated vegetable, but not in soup. And meat, horse meat. See, in the German army, a mechanized division has got umpteen horses and so in in the combat action, you're driving all these horses ahead plus the ones that

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were there in Austria on the farms. So we butchered horses and we fed them meat, potatoes and vegetables. And coffee, of course. And bread. Now bread, that was something that presented a bit of a problem. We found a bakery and we got some people who were prisoners in the camp to do the baking. We didn't have any yeast, all we had was oats, and mixed oats mixed with water turned into bread--I think maybe I'm responsible for for the oatbread in the United States today. But, ah, we baked thousands and thousands of loaves and we had to put because when they are first baked and they come out, they are just nothing but squishy water. if you will. So we put them in the warehouse to dry out. And after they got dry enough that we could slice, every prisoner got one slice of bread. and then after a little while, they got two slices. And bread, eh, eh, prior to our occupation, bread was the most the precious article of food that they had in the camp or ever had or ever will. And so then it got to where we could give them a quarter loaf of bread. Ah, and our stock of bread kept building and building, so finally, I said: OK. Give everybody half a loaf of bread. One day one of the prisoners came in and said: Colonel, We don't want anymore bread. We've got enough. [laughs] Which

was quite rare because bread, I say, you could get your head bashed in or your throat cut for a half a piece of bread. And they used to store in in their bunks and sleep on it. If they hadn't eaten it.

Roll 3

Sandy: Did you bring in German civilians to help you with the running of the camp?

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No. We didn't bring any civilians in, but we did bring in about 400 German Wehrmacht soldiers. We had, see, the SS, when they left, they disrupted everything. And they were gonna burn the place down, but the prisoners said: Please don't. And they didn't do it. But they had disrupted all of the water supplies, the sewage, the electricity, everything, there wasn't anything in the camp. And so we found out that there was a prisoner of war camp where they had a lot of prisoners who were capable of doing special

things. And so we got 400 German POW and brought them in to do all of the things that were necessary, which helped us tremendously. And they were they were conducted as soldiers and they were not treated as prisoners, and we got along very well. And they brought life back into the camp.

Sandy: How do you think they felt?

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Well, I remember the captain who was in put in command of this detachment. His name was von Bruhl and he was an Austrian. Ah, he couldn't believe it. They they were combat soldiers and they they they really and truly didn't believe that their own people and other people were being treated like that. It was an experience for them the same as for us.

Sandy: Tell me again about the sensory things like the smell and the sound and the women's barracks.

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Well, I'll tell you. To explain or describe the condition of the women in that barracks --words fail me. After we occupied the camp in force, when I brought more people in,

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we burned all of those building because they were so full of vermin it was--oh you couldn't believe it. It is beyond imagination. The women ah, living under these horrible horrible conditions, they were all gotten out of there, they were all cleaned up, they were all deloused, and we just burned the buildings down. Got rid of them, they were no good. It's a--I don't know, to see these women, why they were treated as they were and under the horrible conditions that they were living, I don't know, I I have no answer for that except the brutality. And again, man's inhumanity to man. That's the only way I can describe it.

NEXT TWO PAGES OF COL. SEIBEL ARE VOICE OVER ONLY!!

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Sound roll 2. VOICE OVER ONLY

Sandy: Tell me about the kommandant of Mauthausen.

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Oh, Franz Ziereis was a colonel in the SS and he was in command of of Mauthausen and two small camps down the road called Gusen. In fact, Mauthausen was a control camp for 23 camps. And Ziereis was the boss man. And, of course, when we captured the place, he was gone, and we were looking for SS. And you know how you could find SS? They all had a tatoo. Their blood type was tattooed here. And if they'd got rid of their uniform and you didn't weren't sure, all you had to do is tear open his sleeve and if there was a

tattoo there or a scar, they were former SS. And so Zihereis left the camp. And we got word that he was down in the village, living with his mistress. So we sent a patrol down to get him. And they went up to this house--they had been told where it was--and he started to run away, and he was shot three times. He was shot once in the middle of the back, once in the side of his arm, and the other side of his body. And they brought him back, and I was told they brought him into the camp. They said: Do you want to see him? I said: I sure do. And so he was being interrogated and it lasted for quite a little while. And he was being kept alive on blood plasma and cigarettes. And in the interrogation, he denied that he had ever hurt anyone. Or caused anyone to be hurt, he was an innocent man. He did no harm at all. So we got through questioning him, and, of course, it is all being done by an interpreter, and then relayed to me. And finally, he got tired and finished, no more questions. And we didn't know--they said to me: What shall we do with him? Oh, I said: We are all through with the interrogation. Ah. By the way, aren't we out of blood

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Sound roll 2. VOICE OVER ONLY

plasma? And the fellow who was giving it to him, he said:
Yes, we are. And that was Colonel Ziereis, former
Kommandant of Mauthausen concentration camp.

COL RICHARD SEIBEL:

Ziereis used to put on a special show when Himmler would
visit Mauthausen. Ziereis would put on a special show for
him by special executions and such. Ziereis and his son,
ah, used to practice on prisoners, target practice, getting
ready for the hunting season. That is how brutal they were,
and not much consideration for a human being.

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