

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Fimmel, Richard

Date of interview: 11/15/1994

Summary: (Liberator)

Richard was born in 1924, but does not state where. His mother was Polish and German, and his father was German. He knew both languages and was fluent in German. He does not speak about his childhood prior to his enlistment. I believe he was a U.S. citizen, however; he doesn't specify. His high school teacher advised him about a meteorological cadet program available to good students, so in November 1943, at the age of nineteen, Richard voluntarily enlisted for this program. This would give him control of his own destiny instead of being drafted. Richard was not directly involved in combat or with the prisoners during the war. His point of view at the time of his enlistment was the war had to be won in order to benefit all of mankind. He had general knowledge of the treatment of the Jews in Nazi Germany, as did many others. Shortly after his completion of the meteorological program, it was cancelled and he was sent to England on December 24, 1943 aboard a ship. The enemy destroyed other ships, with some of his friends aboard. This was when Richard started to see some of the destruction of the war.

After leaving England, Richard was sent to Saint d'Or in France, where he joined Patton's Army as a Liberator. His job was to attend to the affairs of the city, which was controlled by the Military Government. The first assignment was Gusen, a labor camp that still housed Jewish prisoners. Shortly before arriving, the military government had ordered all people age sixteen and older, to help clean up the camps. He doesn't specify what "clean up" meant. Upon arriving there he found the condition of the prisoners horrible, crammed barracks, sometimes four bunk beds deep per space and minimal necessities. Most prisoners were dying and walked around in a state described as a trance. The liberators discovered an underground tunnel that had been used as a way for the prisoners to travel back and forth to the Nazi assembly factories for days at a time without being seen. They had remained there after the end of the war because they were unaware that the SS officers had fled. Most of them were afraid to leave for fear of being killed.

Richard did not have much contact with the prisoners and did not witness any of the evidence of cremations or mass killings. He reports that he did see pictures from Mauthausen, an extermination camp, that showed piles of bodies, in piles 15' long, 8' wide and 4 1/2 feet tall. The number of prisoners being exterminated in the gas chambers was more than the crematoriums could keep up with. Those exterminated were mostly Jews, including men, women and children. When the war ended, Richard helped with the local affairs of the war zones to try and restore things to somewhat normal conditions. They started to go after some

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of the escaped SS officers and troops and did capture a few. One incident that stands out in Richard's mind is how a Nazi officer was found dead, hanging from a barbed wire fence, with the barbed wire going through his testicles. He wasn't sure how the officer had actually died but knew that the prisoners probably saw to it that he did not survive. He further reports that the officer's son was also forced to watch his father's death and the boy's reaction was to spit on his father for being stupid enough to be caught. This was an example of the brainwashing of the young who witnessed this kind of treatment and had become callous as to the value of another human being.

During 1946 when Richard was finishing up his affairs with the military, he met his wife. He was twenty years old at the time and she was seventeen. She was a displaced person and had escaped from Germany after the bombing of Regensburg, where she lost her mother, brother and grandmother. The Russians had come back with tanks and Richard got an emergency order to have her sent to the United States. Normally, a displaced person could not go more than 3-5 kilometers at a time without a pass in order to keep control of their whereabouts.

Richard returned to the United States in 1946. He and his wife had two children. He doesn't speak much at all about them or his life after the war. He mentions that they made only two close friends during his time in the military because he moved around so much. He no longer has contact with them but has tried a few times to reach them. He did discuss with his family how he felt about his experiences and has their support. His wife was much more affected with recurring nightmares of the horrible experiences of her escape and loss of family members. Some of his family was shocked to find out that the Germans could treat other human beings this way because they too were of German descent. He describes some of them to be what we call today a "*revisionist*", those refusing to believe these atrocities ever occurred.