

John M. Steiner collection

Interviews with former members of the SS, other Nazi officials, and witnesses to Nazi Germany  
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Interview with Karl Cerff

00:07 *voice starts mid-question.* Talks about what happened on a daily basis in the camps.

5:00 Never saw Jewish prisoners except one random person with a yellow star and no homosexuals, who wore a red star. He was more involved with rules and regulations and actual criminals. Talks about the mixing of criminals and political prisoners and being surprised about this.

8:20 Political prisoners included a wide range, including Poles, Russians, and Czechs. Many of these were just patriots of their own country. Talks about patriots versus Communists and the basis for the war and what would happen to them after the war - whether they would still be soldiers.

10:14 It was easier for me to be guiltless than the prisoners. There were also Catholic priests, regular unemployed, and others. Talks about their nutrition and physical conditions and their shoulder bones protruding from their clothes, which were insufficient for the winter. They used empty cement sacks for warmth and to stay dry when it rained. My impression was that the hardship of living in the camps made it difficult not to break down people.

15:06 Talks about being told about smuggling things into the camp such as clothing or bread and the punishment for this. Seems to say that he never saw all this, but was told about it. The beatings were often brutal. In sum, what I personally saw was legitimate within national systems. The system of concentration camps mixing criminals with political prisoners is not legitimate but I didn't have this opinion at the time.

19:00 What I saw of inhumanity and breaking families up was wrong, but no one had human rights at the time. There was a certain solidarity between prisoners and guards. Only saw one example of mishandling situations, considering that there was a war going on.

21:50 Talks about opportunities to inform on people who weren't serving correctly, but never did. Officers and guards behaved appropriately for the circumstances. The fear of the higher officers was very real.

25:20 Cerff recalls only one opportunity to talk with a commanding officer and never had another meeting with him. The officer never told him very much about what was going on. Cerff was never confronted with a situation where he would have had to violate his morals or his military orders. It was a military situation and he never felt that he was doing something other than what he should. He was just watching over prisoners and he was sworn as a soldier.

30:35 What really impressed him was that as a voluntary enlisted man, guarding camps or depots, that he was thrown together with pseudo soldiers who weren't regular military men. He felt like a second class soldier being mixed together with the others who didn't have the real military education he had.

33:06 He was talking about what he felt and knew at the time. He was born in 1921 and in 1933, at the start of the Third Reich was only 11 years old and grew up with the government. He identified with the government because he grew up in it. There were no alternatives and there was the promise that things would get better with that government. It was unimaginable that there could be a revolt against it.

35:30 He recalls a rambling story about a school mate, the son of a political leader, who was very zealous in his beliefs. Cerff met this same man later after he was a concentration camp guard. Quotes "my country, right or wrong" and the state has more power than the individual, so he has to live with what he did in serving the state. They were indoctrinated to serve the government, not to be an individual.

41:10 Steiner on phone call with Cerff (*very faint and indistinct voices*) conversation about getting Cerff and Fuchs together. Mostly chitchat, weather in California, etc.