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Summary

Louise Birch was a 24-year-old 2nd Lieutenant nurse, when her unit, the 133rd Evacuation Hospital was ordered to the Gusen Concentration Camp in Austria, at the end of the war in Europe. Louise had been very sheltered and naïve and the sight of the camp's inmates really unnerved her. They noted an unbearable smell as they approached the camp. Only a few inmates, walking skeletons, were in the yard. Each had been issued a blanket and some had no other clothing. The inmates were mostly men. There had been some women but they were treated elsewhere. There were no children at all. The unit established a hospital in the SS barracks. There were not even enough beds for all the patients. The inmates had tuberculosis, lice, dysentery, malnutrition and other diseases which had to be treated. The unit commander had laid down strict rules, he feared that these female nurses had not been trained properly to handle concentration camp inmates. Nurses were only allowed to provide medications, no other contact was permitted. This seemed like a gruesome way to handle patients. German civilians were brought in, who had to wash and feed the patients. The nurses were instructed to dress in such a fashion, so that inmates were not able to discern that they were handled by females. Their faces were shielded by masks, hair was covered and only the eyes were showing. However, in one incident, when a patient patted the rear of a nurse, it became clear that at least some understood who was administering the medications. Louise never had an opportunity to walk around and see the camp beyond her workplace. She did not understand the languages of the patients, but some of the US Corpsmen were able to communicate with them. The Corpsmen were charged with removing those who had died during the night and then immediately a new patient arrived as a replacement. Food with the patients was a significant problem. If food was made available, the patients would gorge themselves and the language problem stymied control; an inmate, a Jewish doctor, was able to assist, although he technically was not permitted to act in his medical capacity.

Louise only desired to get back home and leave this place as quickly as possible. Finally, the unit was relieved by the 95th Field Hospital which was staffed by only men. Trucks came to load some of the Polish patients to return those able to travel back to Poland. In the hospital a constant watch was needed to preclude suicides.

When Louise got home, she was very happy to get away from those patients; she got married and soon forgot about her experience. She did take a trip about 20 years later, to Austria and while there, she was able to find the camp. The gate was locked but a storekeeper nearby had a key but he was reluctant to help until Louise explained that she had been a nurse there. At that point she was hugged and kissed and the camp was made open for her. About fifty years after her tour of duty, she was asked to talk about her concentration camp experience. She maintained that she could really not shed any new light on this subject but the interviewer showed that this was not true.