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Summary

John Hill was an 18-year-old Private First-Class soldier, assigned to Company I, 394th Infantry Regiment, 99th Infantry Division when his unit on its way to capture Giessen, Germany, came upon camp Hadamar (possibly Oflag XII-A). This was not like one of the Labor camps or a POW camp which John had seen before, where the prisoners relatively looked in better shape; this was much worse. All the German guards had departed. As the unit arrived, the inmates were cheering behind their barbed-wire fence, as they realized their liberation, while a jeep with its chain attached to the locked entry gate, managed to pull the gate open. All the German guards had departed. At the entrance, John noticed two wheel-barrels, which on closer inspection contained dead bodies, a sight which he could never get out of his mind. There were about 25 men, aged 20-30 in the yard, all badly emaciated, dressed in striped prison uniforms with the Star of David prominently showing. John entered a barrack where about 50 men were housed. The smell was unbearable, many, including John, had to throw up. The prisoners, all looking weak, laid on hard, stacked wooden bunks, with rags as their blankets, most unable to get up and some clearly dying. It was the worst sight John had ever experienced. There were prisoners from Germany, Austria, Poland, Russia and other European countries. Further along in another yard, there were about 100 dead bodies stacked together, apparently ready for cremation in the nearby crematorium, where the ovens contained ashes and smoke was still coming from its chimney. A gas chamber, with a white-tiled floor, was adjacent. There also was a warehouse where items of clothes and other belongings were neatly assembled – jackets, pants, eyeglasses, false teeth, shoes, some gold teeth, etc. There was an operating room containing a concrete table with drain, where residual blood was still visible. Prominently in midst of the camp was a large Hospital building, which in earlier years had been a Sanatorium. John did not have a chance to inspect it, since the unit stayed but a couple of hours. His Lieutenant had reported the status of the prisoners and soon ambulances arrived. The soldiers were warned not to feed the inmates, only water was permitted, since the sudden intake of food could cause death to the starved men. Blankets were distributed. John felt sad, shameful and inadequate; he could not look the prisoners in the eyes. They shook the soldiers' hands with thanks for their liberation. A group of Russian women soldiers ventured into the next town to take revenge against the Germans. They killed some, including the town's mayor and MP's had to be called to restore order, as John's unit continued on towards Giessen.

When John returned home, he just wanted to get the war behind him. For about a week he was completely unruly and had a problem adjusting; seeing so many killed had made him insensitive. He had some bad dreams and did not want any more combat duty. He managed to settled down and was chosen to proceed to West Point as an instructor. Many years later, he received recognition from a Jewish group in South Carolina as a liberator. He was enthused about his interview in 1994, since he felt it was important to tell what he had seen, to counter those who claimed it never happened.