

Summary of Oral History: Richard Lewis

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This Summary was written by a USHMM Volunteer on [03/2022]

Richard's oral history is presented in two parts; the 2nd part does not reveal any new happenings but rather expands on matters presented in the 1st part, along with discussions on political, racial, religious and philosophical topics based on the Holocaust and World War II.

Richard Lewis was a 25-year-old Staff Sergeant when he became a Prisoner of War of the Germans. He had entered the Army in April 1942, been assigned to the 94th Bomb Group, 301 Bomb Squadron, when his plane was shot down on July 14, 1943 and crash-landed near Paris. He evaded capture for about 3 weeks, along with another crew mate, secured civilian clothing and made contact with the underground, but was suspected as a Gestapo plant. He was subsequently caught by the Gestapo and spent time in a French prison until ultimately transported into Germany to a German jail near Frankfurt. At that location, he saw his first Jewish prisoner, apparently an older, wealthy man, with a Star of David on his clothes, along with the German word 'Jude'; that prisoner was then removed and he heard shots but he never really knew what had happened. Subsequently he was transferred into Stalag 17-B, where he spent the rest of the war, until April 1945, when about 500 of the POWs were forced into a 3-day march. Along the way, in the vicinity of Linz, Austria, they encountered several hundred concentration camp prisoners marching in the opposite direction. They all looked like walking, emaciated corpses in their striped prison uniforms. The German guards were eager to keep the two groups apart and prohibited conversation, but regardless, there were shouts back and forth in various foreign languages. Those prisoners were apparently Jews from different countries, on the way to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. While the American POWs had lost a lot of weight, there was still no comparison with the terrible condition of the concentration camp prisoners, some were eating grass and they had no possessions. It was shocking. He saw some prisoners helping others to walk, while those who fell were fatally beaten with rifle butts; there were dead prisoners lying all along the street. The American POWs had had some assistance from the Red Cross, which these prisoners obviously did not have, although even the POW meals, near the end, were reduced from three to two and then to but one meal per day.

At liberation, after 22 months as a POW and a loss of 30 lbs., with weight down to 110 lbs., Richard ate too much and became very sick, needing hospitalization. In the hospital, he met a Dutch Jew who was a doctor and who spoke perfect English. He explained that he was the only survivor of 25,000 from his hometown. Weighing but 70 lbs., he had been found in a box car alive, among all the corpses, and had been brought dirty into the hospital ward where he was cleaned-up and provided with fresh clothing. It is not known if he survived.

Richard has written a book about his experience which was well received, with no more volumes left to sell. He had initially made some mistakes in his adjustment after discharge, but finally married a second time and settled down as a family man.