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Interview with Milton Shurr, 2/10/95

SWB: Tell us what you saw and what you encountered...

MILTON SHURR: I forgot the exact dates, in the middle of

April, whether the nineteenth or whatever. But I had been,

I've been part of a displaced persons team. It was called

DP 2, attached to first army. And we were the, I guess the

showplace team of our first army, whenever somebody wanted

to see a displaced person program, they brought them around

to where we were. I joined the team in nineteen, well I

guess, forty-four, in the fall, and uh, apparently there

were some problems there, and the captain had done something

horrible and they threw him out, and I became temporarily in

charge of the camp until they found an American captain. At

that time the team was composed of both American allied

officers and American enlisted personnel. And uh, at that

time uh, they were in Vervier, Belgium, which was probably

several miles from the Malbadies, town of Malbadie, and uh

we had several French officers, Belgian, Dutch, I think,

attached to us. And uh we operated a program up until the

time of the uh, so-called bulge. And uh we were ordered not

to leave this displaced persons camp because it would have

essentially started a riot in the town. And uh, we were

lucky that the war, that not the war but the Malbadie pushed

the bulge uh, collapsed uh, after a week and a half, when

the Americans were able to use their air power, but when the

fog lifted from the Malbadie forest. And uh, then around

the first of the year, I came down with uh, and we had,

prior to that time, we had, during the period of the bulge,

we either had air attacks or shelling because we had

explosions in the courtyard and, which knocked out our

utilities there. We had about 500 displaced persons of

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different nationalities. And uh so we had to dig slit

trenches and so on. And bring in water, and so on, to keep

things going. So we had a lot of uh-g-good experience in

disaster in emergency problems. Then I came down with

Hepatitis, about the first of the year, and uh, was sent

first to Paris, then England, for a period of treatment

convalescence. And I returned to the uh, to rejoin the

group, in April. And uh, I learned that our particular

detachment was in Vetzlar, Germany, in a large uh barracks

area, taking care of displaced persons. The time I arrived,

which was probably the middle of the day, I had heard, when

I got there, I had heard that they had left, for Buchenwald.

So I got transportation to Buchenwald, and arrived there,

around dinnertime. And uh, I was made officer of a guard

for the evening, and estab- was established in uh, in one of

left side of that, uh, the typical concentration camp en

trance. You'd, you-you'd see a two story building with a

tower and uh there were offices on each side and uh I was

sitting in one of the offices of one of the SS personnel,

and uh, there was a lot of coming and going of third army

personnel, and uh, I quickly learned that uh, a lot of the

enlisted personell and others of third army were uh seizing

all of the lampshades that were made out of uh skin. Uh,

those, that was one of the hobbies of Ilsa Koch, who was the

wife of the agita [?] in charge of the um concentration

camp. And uh, so I managed to save a few pieces, walked

them up at the desk, knowing that eventually there would

have to be some criminal investigation. And these were

saved and turned over later to uh the personnel. Uh there

was a lot of confusion, uh, the uh camp, like all big camps

seems almost to run itself. Uh by decentralization, and uh,

the uh, each barracks had a nationality group. And they

were horrible places, as you've seen pictures, you know, you

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had two, uh, a two-story set of bunks in which they put

about six people in a little slot of maybe about eight feet,

uh, wide. And almost if somebody turned I guess the whole

people would have go, you know, uh turn with them. Uh they

were horrible places and they smelt to high heaven. And uh,

I don't know whether we had the same uh kapos as they were

called as the Germans had, but obviously uh, many did pick

new-new people. And I used to meet with this group every

morning, and they'd tell me what the problems were in the

camp. About food, about clothing, and so forth and so on.

And many of these ex-prisoners would grab a bicycle,

motorcycle, or whatever, and they would, they were chasing

around all over the area. And they would tell us about a

um, a barn full of shoes, a uh, a uh warehouse full of flour

or wheat or whatever. And then the seargant and I would go

down uh his pick up truck, look it over, if we thought it

was worthwhile, we then would have one of our trucks. Now,

the, our team uh had as its basic transportation, two jeeps,

uh with two trailers. And uh, we'd had a lot of experience

using captured German equipment, French equipment, what not.

And so uh, the uh, these fellows managed to get two diesel

five-ton trucks, and uh, stole or borrowed, uh, tires and

what not. And we established our own, little uh garage.

And uh, what we had really was kind of a hot car racket.

They would spray the captured stolen German trucks and spray

them olive drab and we would then put some fake ordnance

numbers on and we were off and running. Uh, and uh, you

know.. Actually it got so bad that I had civilian people

coming in and saying they lost their car and uh more than

once I would discover a car had blue paint under the olive

drab and we would return it to the Germans. About, we would

go down and, and uh, to the various town, or village, and

take whatever we thought we could need. And we had the

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highest priority after the United States army. The United

States army wasn't seizing any food or clothes, and so we

literally took everything we had. And in the period of

about, oh, two months or so, we pretty much cleaned up the

area between Leipzig and way down into the forest area. Uh,

and uh, you know, it was, and we had a lot of complaints.

The captain would come to me and, say well I shouldn't do

that, and so forth and so on, and uh, I would disregard him,

I just felt so strongly that people who had suffered as much

as these unfortunate uh people and just by luck survived,

shouldn't, you know, have any more problems. And uh what

happened of course at Buchenwald, there were 15000 survi

vors, over a period of the several years in the camp, which

first took prisoners and uh were criminals, and then uh,

various displaced persons, uh, for political reasons or

others. And they were kept there. During that period, I

think about 50,000 had died according to the inmates. And

uh they did have a, at one time, a little exhibition of uh

floats and other things that they'd put up and these

pictures are in the museum, Holocaust museum. When our,

when we arrived, of course there was confusion. And uh my

first, our first concern, perhaps the captain or somebody

ordered, a uh, field hospital, to come in and spray DDT

which brought the typhus epidemic under control. People

were dying at the rate of 300 a day from malnutrition,

starvation, or disease as the case may be. Gradually the

thing got under control. Now everybody's always excited

about the heaps of, dea-, of the dead that were seen in most

of these camps, and uh they were horrible cause you say the

evidence of starvation. Uh, people had about 600 calories a

day which was enough to keep them alive for six months or

less, depending on uh disease and other problems. Luck...

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[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Okay, you were talking about the piles of bodies.

MILTON SHURR: Oh yes. Well uh-th-p-and in Buchenwald, at

any rate, the pile of bodies was really occasioned by the

fact they ran out of coal. And uh, so they couldn't have

been consumed in a crematorium. And the captain apparently

got the burgermeister and uh some of the townspeople to come

in and help bury the bodies, uh, if, they probably used

bulldozers some other things. Uh, but it was a horrible

looking thing and of course that, that caught all the

interest, pictures that saw it. It was uh, it was a

terrible thing, the, you know, slow starvation, people

worked in the quarries, and uh, they assembled uh, in

Buchenwald uh, binoculars, small arms and things like that.

There was no factories there. Uh, so the, the people who

had tended to survive either had jobs peeling potatoes or

some access to the uh kitchen or whatever, so they, they got

by. The uh, lot of very important personalities, and

political scene like Leon Blum, and one of the royal family

of Italy uh, were political prisoners there at one time.

And it had some criminals there too, and, it wasn't a very

pleasant place. Um, I operated, I was able to survive

really. We worked, I w-, um, I worked, anyway, about

sixteen hours a day trying to find food, and I probably made

a mistake, I should have relied more on the federal

government. But many of the other camps used to come to our

camp to get bread and other things because they just

couldn't handle. Uh, I operated on the basis of, of really

uh, decentralization of authority. Um, one of my colleagues

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who was senior to me uh, spoke German, very fluent German,

and he was listening to everybody's problems. And uh, as a

result uh, he became very much emotionally upset and became

insane, and uh, had to be taken away. He came back, but he

never made it, uh, he never recovered. And I refused to

talk to people. Everybody, each one had the most horrible

personal story, they, they were looking for loved ones,

relatives and so on, and uh, I, I would say, you're just

going to have to wait until Red Cross or somebody else gets

in the camp. And uh I just refused to get into individual

case work, uh services. You can't, you couldn't and do...

what I had to do was just keep people alive till such a time

as they can be repatriated. And of course, immediately, uh,

the Germans were released to go to their hospitals or

wherever. All the allied personnel, there were French,

German, English, a few American aviators who were caught out

of uniform. All were returned to their respective, uh,

forces. And we were left in a camp with Russians, Poles,

Eastern Europeans of various descriptions, and at a later

stage, those who wanted to go west, particularly the Poles

could elect to do so, or if they wanted to return to their

own country. And it was, sort of all the educated, of

course, wanted to go west, the less educated wanted to back

to their land. And uh then we, later on, we had a new

infusion of people who were Russians and Poles and, and

Yugoslavs, Hungarians, who wanted to go back east. So we

had a shifting population, but it was always about the same

size.

SWB: Tell me, did you do something to replace the existing

Kapos.

MILTON SHURR: As far as I know, I don't know whether we

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were using the new or the old, but I was using people who

would tell me what the problems were, where there were

sources of food that they had learned, and so forth and so

on. And this was my intelligence network. Uh, when the Red

Cross came in I said well, your job is to work with the

people to answer their questions and problems concerning uh

the location of relatives. The joint distribution committee

came in and, I've hav- I having worked in Oklahoma City uh,

as head up of the Jewish community council there, you know,

I knew all about welfare and coordination planning and the

joint distribution came in, I said great, I said, uh, we

have a uh large barracks full of almost 2000 Jewish

children, and uh, I haven't even seen them. And this is

your job. And I fixed them up an office, and typewriters,

so on, same thing with the Red Cross. So I attempt to

decentralize what went on, and the result is, I concentrated

on what I thought were the high priorities, of health and

safety and nutrition for the groups. And I probably made a

mistake, I probably should have relied more on the uh army

to supply us with supplies instead of knocking myself out,

but that's water over the dam. Finally, about, we were

there from April and the whole area of Thoringia, province

of Thoringia, was turned over to the Russians according to

agreement of uh July first. So that, oh, sometimes about,

be- sometimes in June, we were running out of food and uh I

went to the army headquarters which was right outside of

Weimarr, and uh, talked to the colonel, in charge of supply

and I said that we had exploited the area on our own for oh

three months, and we were running out of food and we needed

some help. Well, he said, I, we can't do anything for you.

So I said, well, I, the only thing I can do is open up the

gates and let these people go out into the town of Weimarr

and seek whatever they want and so on. And I said you will

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be responsible for their public safety of the town. Now he

got the message and we got the food, but this was the, uh, I

was a, I was a second lieutenant then promoted to first

lieutenant, but you know I, I had had my fill of all these

uh, so-called lieutenant colonels and colonels uh, who uh,

really, hiding behind rules and so on, and uh I had other

experiences. But this one was the last major one I had, and

I had no compunction about it. I said, if you, if you think

you want to send me home in irons I'd be glad to, I said, I

worked like a dog, and I said, I'd be glad to get some rest.

And so you know we prevailed and uh that's what happened and

uh so, but it was a real problem, and uh, it was uh, and as

I look back apparently I never realized that uh, this

famous, what's the name, uh, ... spokesman for the

concentration camp, what was that Weisel, Wiesel, can't

pronounce the name... um, you know it was also one of my

children, you know, I never even laid my hands and eyes on

him, I just couldn't, didn't have the time, and uh, this is

pretty much how you could survive in a uh you know, running

a city of people, uh all injured by indirection. But we

were very experienced personnel, for example, uh, we had

requisitioned a ton of captured German cigarettes, and we

used that to pay the Polish displaced persons who would man

our two uh diesel trucks that we carried food, and uh, we

had a young man who was the son of a Czech family promi

nently in the steel business, uh who uh was edu-, who was

brought up with a Scotch nanny and he spoke impeccable

English, spoke uh Polish, Russian, German, whatever. And he

was our interpreter, and uh working with this Polish group.

So this is pretty much, you know, how we, how we got along,

and uh...

SWB: Tell me about the dogs. Did you see some, the dogs

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left by the SS.

MILTON SHURR: Uh no, I had heard that there were a few dogs

left by the SS, and the surviving prisoners who uh, were

more able, they just strangled the dogs. Uh, everybody

talks about liberating Buchenwald. Well, Buchenwald was

like the, like Rome, you know, during the days of the

Vandals. When the SS heard that the first or third army was

coming down the road, they just took off. And uh, and the

Americans just walked in, and then they walked out again.

So even-he-so when people talk about liberators, uh you

know, it really is in this sense, for example, was I a

liberator, I wasn't a liberator, I was a, one of the people

assigned to create order and stability in a situation that

was very chaotic. And uh, we had so much good experience in

the previous year running camps and so on, that everybody

knew their job and, you know, it was an efficient, small but

efficient team. We had some Polish, we had some rather

Ukrainian hangers-on, we had about ten, uh, Dutch people,

mostly young men, who, for the lock of it, worked with us,

you know, just to be with us. It was great fun for them.

So we had this informal group running the camp and everybody

had a good time doing a job. They worked hard and uh, this

is how, how we operated. And uh, I don't know, our team

could have handled a large camp like Dachau or something

else because uh Buchenwald was relatively a small camp,

although had 15,000 survivors, but, you know, it was small

by comparison to these other camps in terms of physical

properties and so on. Uh I had a number of little things

that I had picked up which I turned over to the Holocaust

Museum.

[END]

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