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Alfred Sundquist interview 2/13/95

SWB: Tell me how you came across a camp during World War

II.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well the camp was uh [ahem] about two or

three miles from town called Ludwigslozen. And I was with

18th Airborne headquarters at that time, under General

[ahem] Matthew Ridgeway. Now um, we're told that uh our

troops are advancing, had overrun a small concentration

camp. And being a physician and a major, I was told to look

into the situation and write up a report on it, and take

whatever action was necessary, which I did. Part of my job

was uh along the field of public health, so I might be on

that concentration camp for a couple of days, and then I

might be at a hospital where there were 1500 cases of

Typhus, not typhoid but Typhus fever. People with a

temperature of 105 for a couple of weeks. And um went to

other hospitals, um, one hospital had a German general in it

an- got captured him, [laughs] and took him back to army

headquarters alone[?]. That was essentially the uh type of

work that I was doing and concentration camp was a part of

that.

SWB: Had you heard about them, did you know what you were

going to find?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: No I had no idea until I got there and

saw what was going on.

SWB: Describe it to me, take yourself back and tell me how

you approached and what you saw.

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ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well I [ahem] well I [ahem] I had a jeep

and driver and we drove up to the concentration camp where

the barracks were, of course the Germans had left, had

flown, and uh, looked around and I believe that the whole

camp was only on about three or four acres and there was no

uh, there were no gas ovens or anything like that. Uh,

there was one place there where the dead were piled up like

cardboard, and they wore these uniforms which were striped.

[Ahem] And there were other people who were near death from

starvation. So apparently I don't know why the people were

sent there, I didn't get involved in that at all, uh, in the

barracks, as I recall, now I'm 88 years old and what, and

this happened 50 years ago, but damned if I can forget it.

It's so, it had such an imprint on my memory. The uh, the

wire in the beds of the barracks was barbed wire, how they

could sleep on barbed wire I'll never know. [Ahem]

Starvation causes a loss of teeth and a swelling of the

legs. And this was very apparent in those that were still

alive. And uh there was cannibalism there and in the

barracks I saw evidence of liver having been eaten, human

liver, they made a, opened up the chest and the lower

abdomen and got out the liver, they could eat the liver when

their teeth were gone, but they couldn't eat anything else

without teeth. And uh, [Ahem], shall I just continue...

SWB: Did the people who were alive, what did they do when

they saw you?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well there were two or three women there

who were in very good shape, and they were smiling and

seemed to be very happy. I think that's probably because

they saw someone in an American uniform, and because they

were free now. Um, there were a few uh, they were lying on

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the ground, a few of the inmates they were lying on the

ground, in the last stages of starvation and death and uh,

um, I had to write up a report on this, and do you want me

to continue this way [ahem] um so the question was what did

I do about it. Well, I wrote up a report, went back to my

headquarters, and told them that [Ahem] made my recom

mendations and said that the town of Ludwigslust is very

nearby and I sai- and they had apartment houses there and I

suggest we kick the Germans out of the apartment houses and

move the concentration camp people in there and feed them,

and we had to feed them very carefully, just give them

liquids, otherwise you give them too much they'll, you'll

kill them. Well actually we lost 25 percent of them.

[Ahem] there was a, a captain, a Dutch captain and he was a

Lunden Pole, a l- uh I me- I mean a Polish captain, and he

was a Lunden Pole, and of course of the Russians, just loved

to get ahold of them \_\_\_\_\_\_ Poles, Lunden Poles. And uh I

said now look, I'm gonna have to leave here tomorrow, and I

want somebody in charge, and I'm gonna put you in charge of

this place. He said, but look, look at the uniform I have

on here, I can't be in charge with this uniform like this.

And I said, don't worry about that, I had some enlisted men

with me, I said, look, go over to that apartment house, and

get this, bring this man with you and get him five suits of

clothes and make sure they fit him and look well on him. So

they did that. And uh, then uh, they came back the next day

and the 82nd airborne division got involved in this. 82nd

airborne was one of the divisions that was connected with

the 18th airborne Corps which I was a member. And they had

a funeral for the ones that died, and everyone in the town

of Ludwigslust, I imagine the town was about ten, twelve

thousand people. Everyone there had to attend the funeral.

The men had to dig the graves, and there must have been

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about uh, oh I'd say about 30 or 40 graves there, and the

graves were dug with such precision, that you wouldn't find

an inch difference in the measurements of the different

graves. And uh, so they [Ahem] they were buried there and

the graves were filled with, and they put wreaths on the

graves. I had, I got a lot of pictures, took a lot of

pictures of uh, this camp. And I took a lot of pictures of

the funeral. And the reason I was able to take pictures was

that even though cameras were forbidden, the G2, a

lieutenant colonel in our outfit, who was in charge of

intelligence, was allowed to have army cameras. So I had a

pistol, and usually I hate guns, cause I'm a medical man,

[Ahem], and he saw the pistol and he wanted it, he was

drooling for it. So, I said I'll give you the pistol if

you'll give me a camera with plenty of film. So he said,

okay. So I took pictures of that, and of the funeral and, I

have given those pictures to you and I hope you'll be able

to use them.

SWB: How do you think the Germans who participated in that

burial felt?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: You mean what was the...

SWB: The Germans from the town, yeah.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: What was their reaction to it? I-I d- I

don't know exactly, it's awfully hard, I didn't ask any of

them how they felt about this. I should have, I wish I had

now. But I did take pictures of them and I have some close,

distant pi- and uh, close-ups of women's, one woman's face

and you can see in her face a look of sorrow, guilt, shame,

it was all, I read her face that way and that was a close-up

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picture of her. The films were of good quality, by the way.

Photography was good, the G.I. camera took good pictures.

SWB: Were you there when the inmates moved into those homes

of the townspeople.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh yes, [Ahem] and [Ahem] we didn't have

enough beds although we stole beds from the other

apartments, and let the people sleep on the floor, we hated

them they were Germans. And then, so we had to use straw,

and I have a few pictures of patients sleeping on straw,

l-l-lying on straw on the floor of this apartment house,

which was now our hospital. And uh [Ahem] saw one of the

men smoking a cigarette lying on the straw in the apartment

house, so we had to prevent them from smoking, and uh, we

lost 25 percent of them died in spite of our treatment, they

were so far gone. I imagine that uh, we probably saved

about 25, 75 and lost about 25. It was a relatively small

camp, but a horrible thing oh God. I'll never forget it.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Can you describe coming up to the camp, as if you

hadn't told me before.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Uh-huh, okay. Are you ready? Well

[Ahem] our troops overran this camp and the word was sent

back to our headquarters that the camp was there, and my

colonel, and I was a major at that time, and my colonel uh

told me to come up and look the camp over and make a report

on it, and make recommendations. So I had a jeep and a

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driver with a jeep and uh so we approached the camp in the

jeep and the camp was uh had uh barracks buildings that

looked like an ordinary army camp. Two or three barracks

buildings, open ground, and [Ahem] and one of the buildings,

there was an opening and uh, it looked as though it was a

place where they kept cord wood, but there wasn't any cord

wood there, there's just bo- bodies piled up like cord wood.

That's one of the first things that I noticed. The other

thing I noticed was people lying on the parade ground, two

weak to get up, just barely breathing, there must have been

a dozen of those. And uh, [Ahem] then I was im- wanted to

see what was in the barracks. So I went into the barracks

[coughs] and found that the beds were adjacent to each other

and uh, there was barbed wire, the wire in- in the whole,

the whole-, I mean how they could sleep on a bed of barbed

wire, I couldn't get any answer to that, maybe they didn't

sleep there. But uh on, however, I saw in the barracks, on

several occasions, several beds, bodies in which, in which

there had been, had the chest and abdomen cut open, and

since these people under starvation had lost their teeth and

had swollen legs, and of course were very very underweight,

skin and bones, starvation, they uh, there was cannibalism,

and since they lost their teeth, they could only eat the

liver without teeth, and it was apparent from several bodies

that the liver had been eaten.

SWB: Was there a small? A lot of people talk about

smelling the camps before they got to the camps.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: There was, strangely enough, I have, in

other places in the war I had been in confined areas where

there were bodies and there was a sweet smell of death, but

there wasn't that, at all in this camp.

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SWB: How big was this camp, how many people were there.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: I- I would, I didn't count them but I

would estimate that uh the camp didn't hold over a hundred,

a hundred and fifty people.

SWB: When you were in the town, did you and your friends

find a bust of Hitler, can you tell me about that?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh that was another experience outside of

the camp. [laughs] A brass bust of, just a head of Hitler,

it was a hollow head, so we used that for a football, I

kicked it up and down the street, in a town in Germany and

[laughs] hoping that the people would notice it [laughs].

SWB: Tell me that story again, where did you find that

thing.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: I forget what the town was. I- [Ahem]

see in this concentration camp thing, this was only one of

my jobs, I had other, I was only there for about a day and a

half, and uh then the [Ahem] then the army took over, I mean

we turned it over to the Army and [Ahem] I had to go to all

the, many different hospitals, and all the hospitals that

were overrun I went into to find out if there were any

American or British troops, and I told them, they told me to

ignore the French troops, but uh, Americans or British. And

I captured the German general who was in one of the

hospitals, took him to Army headquarters. That's a t- Oh

and then there was another building where, where there were

1500 cases of Typhus fever, not typhoid but typhus, where

they had a temperature of 105 for several weeks. And the

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Germans were shelling that building and the jeep driver and

I had the building between us and leaving that the building

between us and the Germans were shelling it. But the shells

went over the building and landed in people's yards, uh, r-

oh just-just a few hundred feet from where we were. So we

waited until this, waited for the shelling to stop and it

didn't seem to stop so I told the driver, I said let's go

and see it, just take a chance, so we did and nothing

happened. But [Ahem] that's, I had uh work to do in Italy

and...

SWB: Back at the...

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: There was a lot of malaria in Italy

SWB: Did any of the people react to you at the camp, did

any of them speak English, did you talk to any...

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Didn't talk to anybody except later on

when we moved I talked to that uh Lunden Pole that I told

you about, uh...

SWB: Let's get room tone of this...

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: ...Cause after, I mean fifty years later,

you don't think of those things. What you think about is

the horror, the horrible things

SWB: Right, let's talk about that when we, let's roll again

and talk about that.

[SYNC MARK 3]

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SWB: So tell me what you think about 50 years later.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well I've already mentioned the uh, is

this a repeat?

SWB: Just tell me what you were just telling me then.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh. The actual trip to the camps, the

roads we took and that sort of thing, that's, that's

forgotten. The thing that I remember are the horrors of the

camp, the horrible things that I saw, the terrible terrible

way that people were treated. Uh [Ahem] the starvation, the

uh, these people had swollen legs, they were toothless, they

were gaunt, just skin and bones, some of them couldn't even

get, some of them were lying on the ground in the last

throes of, just ready to die. And there was [Ahem] a uh

place where they used to have wood I suppose, piled up wood

and here the bodies were piled up like cord wood. And um, I

do remember some of the people who were apparently were

recent arrivals, women, particularly and one or two men, who

were well-nourished and happy, and I think they were happy

because they saw somebody in an American uniform which told

them that they were free. The-these things I can remember

I- I can remember all the pictures that I took, you know it,

an- and I have loaned you uh quite a few pictures, that uh

[Ahem] show you what was at the camp. Better than my,

pictures will tell more than a thousand words, and these

pictures do tell you an awful lot. For instance there, at

the funeral, later on, funeral at Ludwigslust [Ahem] that

the 82nd airborne conducted. I took photographs of that,

and uh I took photographs of the people's faces to see if I

could tell from their faces what their emotions were when

they saw these things. And I imagined, at any rate, I

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interpreted these, one woman's face being, showing unbelief,

sorrow, guilt, shame, she was not very happy. ... And uh,

so hard to understand how these things can happen. I don't

think they can happen in the United States. Do you have any

more questions.

SWB: Yeah, tell me about the bust of Hitler.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh. [laughs] Somewhere in Germany, it had

nothing to do with this camp that I was describing [Ahem] we

got a hold of a hollow bronze head of Adolf Hitler, a darn

good likeness too. And um mm we were walking the streets of

this town and we were kicking it and using it as a football,

and the people were watching us and uh of course they

couldn't do anything about it [laughs] but, Hitler was a

manic-depressive, and Napoleon was a manic-depressive and

his periods of depression, in Napoleon's time, battles were

lost, in the battle of Waterloo, he was in a period of

depression. His faculty wasn't vital you know, as they are

with many do, when he's in a state of mania. And Hitler, he

had periods of depression too, and his judgement was very

faulty, but they, generals didn't dare to oppose him. But

when he was in a period of depression, he uh just said,

fight to the last man, or something like that, you know, and

in Russia, an awful lot of Germans died- soldiers died

because, the Russian winter, because Hitler was in a period

of depression at that time. And [Ahem] we have, I think

Abraham Lincoln was a manic-depressive and Churchill too.

Church-English Churchill was manic-depressive. Uh, Martin

Luther I believe was too, the one that founded Lutheranism.

So that has a tangential relationship to this camp, beware

of manic depressives [laughs]

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SWB: Now we need to record room tone again

[END]

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