Interview with Dr. Reidar Dittmann

By Harlan Jacobs

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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: Professor, can you tell us briefly what you are doing these days, and perhaps even how you came to America?

A: Yes. A am a professor at St. Olaf College here in Northfield. My field of teaching is art history. And we are, in fact, doing this interview in part of my responsibility. That’s the Art Gallery at St. Olaf.

Q: It’s a very beautiful gallery, I might add.

A: Yes, it’s a nice old building for being in America! It’s a building that will rather soon be on the National Registry, because if anything is a hundred years old in the Midwest, it’s “ancient!” I came to America ages and ages ago in 1945 which was immediately after World War II and came directly to Northfield with some necessary stopovers in New York and in Chicago. I came to this part of the world as a result of what had happened during the war.

Q: Now you were a concentration camp prisoner?

A: Yes, I was. And certain things, of course, led up to that. But this place where I am now teaching, St. Olaf College, is an institution that was established by Norwegian immigrants somewhat more than a hundred years ago. The founders of this institution and their successors had always felt very close to Norway, and during World War II, when Norway was occupied by the Germans, the people around here were as upset about that as anything in the world, that the Germans had infringed upon the holy territory of Norway. So this college donated, to the Norwegian government, a complete scholarship, to a student whose studies had been hampered by wartime activities. And I happened to get the scholarship.

Q: And you were at what age approximately then?

A: I was 18 years old when the war started, and I was then 23 when I came to St. Olaf. Between those years, actually from my 19th through my 22nd year, I was in and out of prison as a member of the Norwegian resistance movement, and for the last 30 months of the war, I was interned in Buchenwald concentration camp.

Q: Can you describe your activities as a member of the resistance, and how they led you to be captured and interned?

A: I was involved in a variety of things. The resistance movement in Norway included press activities, radio listening -- it was illegal to have radios --and radio transmission, the distribution of resistance supplies parachuted in from England. Needless to say, I wasn’t a very successful one, because I was ultimately captured, but during the most active part of my membership in the resistance movement, I was an insignificant clerk in a shipyard. My task in the shipyard was to see to it that the work would go very slowly because anything that was done in Norway during World War II was, of course ultimately done for the Germans. So if you built a ship, you didn’t build it for a Norwegian company, you built it for the German navy, or the German merchant marine. So I was finally captured through a sabotage activity, when a ship was launched and they sank it in the launching. But I had then been in prison twice before.

Q: How did you get out the other times?

A: The first time, I happened to be the first political prisoner in the history of my hometown. My hometown is 1100 years old. And Norway has a thousand years of a kind of democracy, and in October of 1940, half a year after the beginning of the occupation of Norway, which came in April of 1940, I demonstrated against the Germans in my hometown through leading three or four thousand fellow young people in singing anti-German songs. I was a music student at the time, I was studying choral conducting, and it became natural that they needed someone to lead the singing, and I was the one. And standing up there leading the group singing, I was, of course, the most conspicuous individual, not any braver than anybody else, but I was the only one the Germans saw, and so I was apprehended. However at that time the Germans had not taken over the Norwegian judicial system, and there is a long story why they hadn’t. But I was put in a regular Norwegian jail, I was hauled before a regular, loyal Norwegian judge, loyal to the Norwegian cause, and he told me, “We need to sentence you for something or other. Otherwise the Germans will take over. So what do you suggest?” My father was there, I was underage, and I was sentenced for disorderly conduct and was given a six-weeks jail term. And then I came out, after six weeks, and all the school kids in my hometown met me in the marketplace.

Q: You were a bit of a local hero?

A: Sort of. And this was great for me, because I had never been an athlete or sports hero, or a hero of any sort.

Q: Your time in the limelight.

A: It really was. So I felt that it was interesting, and when the underground was organized that same fall, I guess it became reasonable for the organizers to make use of someone who had already showed his loyalty. It was more or less accidental, you know. There was no great consciousness in me at the time.

Q: Was your resistance movement designed to encompass, shall we say, direct martial measures? Were you engaged in any form of sabotage through explosives?

A: Yes, decidedly. After all, the sinking of a major merchant vessel that was being officially baptized by the commanding admiral of the German fleet in Norway. His wife cracked the champagne bottle on the prow, and the ship sailed down the bedding, and didn’t surface at all! We had removed the plates in the night before! So that was an “aggressive” act, and I was hauled in for what the Germans called ‘einstumpfgelief,” which is a summary court, and I was sentenced to life imprisonment for that.

Q: Were there a number of other individuals at the same time?

A: I was the only one. The only one. I was singled out because of my record, and the fact that I certainly had been at the yard. I was guilty! I didn’t declare myself guilty, of course…

Q: Were you surprised they didn’t shoot you on the spot?

A: Yes. And so was everybody else. But this was the 19th, 20th of June, 1941. It wasn’t too deeply into the war. And I think the Germans were taken more by surprise than anything else, at the time. I was sent, then, to West Norway, to assist in the buildings of fortifications -- coastal batteries. And then, on the second of February, 1942, after I had been in West Norway, for a little more than half-a-year, the Norwegian puppet premier of Norway, Vidkun Quisling, was elevated by the Germans into the nonsensical position of being president of the kingdom of Norway. It was a non-event, but on the occasion, the Germans gave Quisling permission to release 1,000 political prisoners. The fact that there already were more political prisoners than 1,000, nobody mentioned at that time, but Quisling released political prisoners according to age, and so I was released. So I was sent home, and immediately got back into the underground. And then I was finally apprehended in the same fall, and sent to Germany.

Q: At that point, I assume, the Germans had had enough of you, and they took stern measures.

A: Yes, they did take very stern measures.

Q: And you, professor, are of what particular religious background?

A: Lutheran, as are 97 percent of the Norwegian population nominally Lutheran. I was more than nominally a Lutheran.

Q: Was that highly unusual, then for them to send you to what we now know was basically an extermination camp for Jews and others?

A: Well, I think that there is a slight misunderstanding in your mind in regard to the German concentration camps, and I have no way of mellowing your view at all, but the initial concentration camps were not built for extermination. They were built for what the word implies: concentration. Concentration. A grouping of members of the opposition, to get them out of the way. In the initial stages, I’m rather certain that the leadership in Nazi Germany did not intend to kill those who got into camps. Until 1938, all the prisoners in German concentration camps were Germans, native Germans.

Q: Political offenders?

A: Political offenders. The Social Democrats, the Communists. In Buchenwald my senior inmate -- every barracks had it’s senior inmate -- was a German prisoner. I had the number 32,232. He was 431. He had been in since the 15th of April, 1933, and this was now 1942, 1943. He was a survivor, a professional survivor! And there were lots of those in the camp. I think that the building of Auschwitz and a number of the camps located in occupied parts of Europe, I think that building was intended as extermination. The camps within Germany which were Buchenwald and Dachau and Neuingen and Sachsenhausen, were built originally to accommodate the German opposition. But the German opposition was not very vociferous, and once they had apprehended maybe two or three thousand, the opposition was silenced.

Q: They cracked the resistance.

A: Yes, they really did. They were successful, from their point of view, in doing this. Ultimately, all the camps became extermination camps in two ways. Auschwitz and Dachau and a few others became deliberate extermination camps where the only purpose of incarceration was to wait for extermination. Buchenwald became an extermination camp through lack of care. When I was liberated from Buchenwald, I weighed 92 pounds. I weigh now 138 or 140 pounds, so I weighed about 50 pounds less than I weigh now, and as you can see, I’m not overly heavy. So that if the war had lasted for another three months, I wouldn’t have. So in that way it became an extermination camp, but not to the extent of these other camps, although I will tell you, when we get to this point, about the practice of extermination in Buchenwald as well, which I witnessed but did not become really a part of.

Q: So when you were sent to this particular concentration camp, you were just being sent to a tighter security facility, is that it?

A: That’s what it was. But I must stress that when I was told that I was going to be deported to a German prison camp -- and it was called a prison camp, it wasn’t called by the Germans a “konzentrazionslager.” Which is really what it was -- I had no illusions! I was rather convinced that I wouldn’t survive. So from the 29th of November, 1942 until my own miraculous day of liberation, I thought that my days were numbered. So in a sense, having survived the camp, I sense that I have experienced a nearly physical resurrection.

Q: I see. Now going back to your first days in the camp, when you walked through the gates, was there an obvious distinction between prisoners of certain nationalities and prisoners of certain religious backgrounds, or was it almost democratic? Did everyone just get huddled into the nearest corner?

A: Now that’s a very interesting question, and I think an important question. It involves issues that people don’t generally understand. First of all, Buchenwald is located out of Weimar, presently in East Germany. Weimar was called the “Athens of the North.” It was Goethe and Schiller’s base. And in the center of Buchenwald concentration camp was a beautiful old oak tree, and on the oak tree was a brass plate, and on that brass plate it said -- this dated from before the camp, of course -- it said on the brass plate, “Under this tree, Goethe sat and wrote some of his most beautiful poetry.”

Q: Were you struck by the incongruity?

A: Oh, I should say I was! But then we came to the camp and we marched through as prisoners, through the military compound, through the wrought iron gates. It was a gateway built in the medieval style, and above the archway was the motto of the camp in brass lettering.

Q: And what was that motto?

A: The motto of the camp was, “Recht oder nich recht, mein Vaterland.” And that means, “Right or wrong, my country.” I didn’t know it then, but I know it now, that that wasn’t a German phrase at all. That was an American phrase. That statement was made by Steven Decatur during the War of Abolition in America. When he lifted his glass to salute the American navy, he said, “My country, may it always be right, but right or wrong, my country.” How absurd a statement that is becomes clear when the Nazis found it convenient to make it the motto of a concentration camp! And across the wrought iron gate was another statement --the Nazis were grand about statements and mottos -- and it said, “Jedem das sinne,” which comes from, I think, it’s Ovid in classical literature, and it means, “To each his own,” so that, “If you go through this gate, it isn’t our fault, it’s yours. You didn’t know your hour of visitation, now you take the consequences.”

Q: The implication was, “You’re getting what you deserve.”

A: Yes, definitely. Now, that was a long way of answering your question about the camps.

Q: We should talk about the death systems in the camps. They graded you on your racial purity. Could we go into how that was accomplished?

A: Yes. When you entered the camp, you were asked all sorts of questions by a clerk who was generally an inmate, of course, but guards standing by, and I remember that on my particular card was written this designation, which bothered me all during my imprisonment. It said, “Germanic intellectual material.” I was a university student. I was “Germanic” -- I had blue eyes, I had blond hair back in those days -- I was like an S.S. poster, a recruitment poster. So, in a sense, that particular card said that I was destined to survive. I was “right” -- Germanic intellectual material. And similar statements, I’m sure, appeared on most registration cards. I was born and raised in Norway, I was Lutheran, Protestant” which all Norwegians are. And a Dutchman would be entered as “Dutch”and “Germanic.” A German prisoner would, of course be a German, and would also, ultimately -- at that time, anyway --be destined to survive. We estimated in Buchenwald that our life expectancy was such that if you were a Norwegian prisoner you might, in fact, survive. If you were Dutch, Danish, you might also survive. If you were Belgian or French, your chances were slightly poorer. The worst you could be in camp -- and we will say something special about the Jews in a minute -- but aside from that, the worst you could be in Buchenwald was to be Polish. As a Polish prisoner, you had a life expectancy of three weeks.

Q: To what do you attribute this system of degradation, or gradation, if you will? Why were the Polish the low man on the totem pole?

A: For the very simple reason that I have a feeling that once the Germans had completed the extermination of the Jews, they would have continued with the extermination of the Poles.

Q: Who would have been next?

A: That’s difficult to say, but I imagine the Czechs, the Bulgarians, the Romanians, the Hungarians. But the Poles were definitely next on the agenda, because Germany wanted to own all of Poland as German territory. That is clearly stated in Rosenberg’s philosophy and his plans for the Third Reich. Alfred Rosenberg was, after all, the one who sowed the seed of the Holocaust in Hitler’s and Himmler’s minds. Rosenberg was an East German -- he came from the Polish border area -- and had always been looking toward that with a tremendous amount of craving.

Q: Just in the normal sense that he would covet his neighbors’ possessions?

A: Yes, I think so.

Q: Or was it more than that? Did he have a hatred, a despising nature toward them, because they were somehow inferior beings?

A: Rosenberg also felt that they were inferior, but you have to remember that Rosenberg felt that everyone was inferior to the pure Germans. Now we who have lived in Norway had lived in a state of racial, cultural isolation for such a long time that we had not been contaminated with the east and the south of Europe, or the Mediterranean, and to Hitler and Rosenberg and Himmler this was wonderful. To us today, we can even regret that we were not more broadly influenced. So the camp was definitely divided into international survivors and into the others for whom the Germans didn’t care at all. Now a totally separate category were, of course, the Jewish prisoners, who came into Buchenwald and all the other camps for the express purpose of being exterminated. Now Buchenwald was not a camp built to accommodate the necessary gas chambers for this, so that when extermination took place in Buchenwald -- and it did -- they brought in gas trucks.

Q: Were they similar to the vans that we saw in the television movie Holocaust?

A: Yes, they were exactly similar to that. They brought in the mobile gas chambers and we could hear these things when they were running. The communication from prisoner to prisoner in the camp was very good, and almost instantaneously we knew what was going on all the time, in the same way as I will insist that the German population, as a whole, also knew what was going on, no matter what they say! I have no confidence in the statement that the Germans will make today, “We did not know that this was happening.”

Q: So there was a well established grapevine, not only among the prisoners, the inmates, but you feel there must have perforce have been an excellent information communication system outside the camp.

A: Without any doubt. When we arrived at Weimar Station, as a group of prisoners headed for Buchenwald, we marched from one part of the station to the other. By that time we were probably a thousand who had accumulated, moving from the boxcars to another boxcar. And as we skirted the streets of this dignified city of Weimar, obscenities were thrown at us by dignified-looking bypassers, and they knew perfectly well that we were headed for Buchenwald concentration camp in the same way as they would have seen it in other parts of Germany. If you lived in Friedrichstrasse in Berlin, and your neighbors to the left and the right were suddenly hauled off and never heard from again, it didn’t take much imagination to know what was happening! Now back to the camp and the camp routines, and the entry of prisoners. In Buchenwald, when I came in, as I already suggested, I was prisoner No. 32,232. When I was liberated from the camp, we were entering into the camp prisoners in the 272,000 category!

Q: A power of ten increase.

A: Yes, in 30 months. And we never had a population that exceeded 40,000! And entry numbers were given in logical sequence. So that meant that in 30 months in Buchenwald, which was not a deliberate extermination camp, in Buchenwald some 200,000 people died in 30 months!

Q: So the camp itself -- just to reiterate, that seems to be a significant point -- the camp itself could only have housed approximately 40,000 persons at any given time?

A: I think that is the maximum that we ever had. The camp was in fact built to accommodate 6,000.

Q: You personally met an individual who had a number in the low digits?

A: Yes, our senior inmate, who was a German Social Democrat from the city of Kassel, was a member of the city council in Kassel in 1932, and after the Nazi takeover in 1933, six weeks after the takeover, he was apprehended on a Sunday outing in the woods with his children, and had survived until this day. I learned after the war that he had even survived the final days of the camp. He is no longer living, but he would have been in his nineties now.

Q: And then before you were liberated, you personally observed numbers as high as 200,000?

A: 272,000.

Q: Where did they have the numbers? Was it classically printed on the lower portion of the wrist?

A: No. The tattooing of the numbers was reserved for Jewish prisoners.

Q: So your number was not indelibly inscribed on your person?

A: No, no. We wore our numbers on a triangle on our left breast pocket, and the triangle had a number and it had your national designation on it. We wore a red triangle. Which meant “political prisoner.” And we had the N-O meaning “Norwega.’ If you were Czechoslovakian, you had an appropriate letter. The Jewish prisoners had a purple triangle with no further designation. And they also had on their triangle their number, but as you know, the Jewish prisoners in the extermination camps had their numbers tattooed for identification afterwards, as well as before.

Q: I see. As you were a prisoner during those 30 months, you certainly must have had some degree of freedom to at least walk around the compound. Can you describe the compound for us?

A: Yes, very well. I can close my eyes, and as if my eyes were open, know every little corner of this camp. As I told you already, as we entered in through the gate, through the mottos, you came to the roll call area. The roll call in German was called “appellplatz.” In the geographical center of the roll call area were the gallows. The gallows were not being used a great deal during my time in the camp, although there were executions by hanging, but it was an impractical and slow mode.

Q: Was it too messy and inefficient for the Germans?

A; Too inefficient for the Germans. Very definitely. But at the roll call, we were hauled up twice a day at 5 0’clock in the morning and at 6 0’clock at night, and then we were counted. And then the numbers had to agree. And if they didn’t agree, we were kept on roll call until it agreed, and sometimes this could take six hours, during which time there was no food, of course there was no comfort or ease of any sort. The weather didn’t matter. The guards were beautifully dressed in winter. They wore furs and heavy boots, and we had only our very poor striped outfits on. There were people who died at roll call every day because of the strain of this accounting system.

Q: They dropped in their place?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And then what happened to them? Were they carted off?

A; They were carted off. One of the active working teams in the camp were the “leizentrager,” the corpse carriers.

Q: Who, generally speaking, got the corpse-carrying duties? Was it reserved to the despised prisoners, the Jews or the Czechoslovakians, or the other, so to speak, lower designations? Or was it somewhat democratic?

A: It was somewhat democratic. You’ve used that term before, and I haven’t thought about it in connection with Buchenwald, but within the inner administration of the camp, a nominal degree of democracy existed, because the camp was organized and operated by the prisoners. Very obviously, we couldn’t get anywhere outside the circumference of the camp, but the guards were not with us day and night. They were in the guardhouses, in the towers, and they were strolling the compound, but if you have 30 or 40,000 people around, even in a relatively confined area, you can’t keep guarding. So the camp was organized by the political prisoners. Sachsenhausen, near Berlin, was organized by criminals -- and there were criminals in camps as well, wearing green triangles -- but we were lucky enough in Buchenwald so that the administration was a prisoner administration with German prisoners at the head. Occasionally these German prisoners were too German to appeal to us, but they were survivors. They had seen a great deal of hardship in their time of imprisonment.

Q: So while they were imprisoned by their fellow -- if you will --elitist Germans, and certainly looked down upon, they still chose to, shall we say, “pull rank” within the group of prisoners.

A: Yes, that is very definitely so. And it differed a little from one to the next. Obviously there were individual differences there. When our senior inmate -- his name was Schohout, number 431 --when we first arrived in the camp as a mob of incoming prisoners and were assigned to his barracks, he was pretty crude to us. And for a long time we were not certain whether he was an inmate or part of the administration. But when he learned that we were Norwegians and that we were privileged by the administration, then he became mellower towards us as well. So there was some of that feeling. But when I think back on Schohout and what he had gone through during the ten years of his imprisonment, I am willing to…

Q: You can find some forgiveness towards him?

A: Yes, I can, for him and for many of the other prisoners that we had in the camp. Now who were they likely to take as their corpse-carriers? The ones that I remember were Czechoslovakians. Whether they had been assigned to be corpse-carriers by the administration or by the prison administration, or whether they had resented this job any more than they would have resented another, I really don’t know. I didn’t know any of them personally and I kind of looked at them the way we sometimes tend to look at undertakers. They’re dealing with death, and we were not.

Q: It was unpleasant, and you would rather they were doing it.

A: Yes, in a sense. It had to be done.

Q: Did you see the burial site, the disposal site for those people that not only dropped in the ranks, but the other people that you conclude were eliminated, the possible several hundred thousands?

A: Yes. In Buchenwald the extermination was limited to, as far as I can remember, a deliberate extermination of eight to ten thousand Hungarian Jews. I’ll tell you about that in a minute. The camp had very active ovens, and…

Q: Were they constructed early on, or subsequent to your arrival?

A: Oh, they were certainly there when I arrived. Oh yes, oh yes. One of the most prominent features in the camp was the smokestack from the crematory.

Q; Was it belching smoke when you were there?

A: Yes, all the time. There was never a time during my 30 months when it wasn’t belching bad smoke, and there was never a time when there wasn’t an odor in the camp that was easily identified with the crematory. The event that I remember with the greatest amount of chagrin took place in November of 1944. And I’ve said this many times, that I feel, looking back on my time in Buchenwald, as though the month of November existed always. You know, there’s nothing grayer and more miserable than November, even here in the American Midwest, and in Europe, it’s the same. And I think of Buchenwald…you know, I must have been there in summer, fall, winter and spring. I have no recollection of springtime, that this regenerative season existed while I was there. It’s sort of perpetual gray, autumn…I’m sure there must have been sunshine…I can’t remember. But anyway, we were getting up to be counted. It was about 4:30 in the morning. Everything you did in camp you did through responding to the public address system that went into every room in every barrack. And on this particular morning, we were informed that the roll call was to be delayed. So we were hovering out in front of our barracks and we heard this shuffling of wooden shoes against the gravel, from the lower part of the camp. The lower part was the receiving area where you were placed when you first arrived, before they had time to assign you to a more permanent place. And in the lower part of the camp there was a gigantic Russian circus tent, a memento from a time when the Germans had arrested an entire Russian circus and hauled it lock, stock and barrel into Germany! And they’d taken this tent and put it up in the lower part of the camp, and the tent provided accommodation for about 10,000 people, no matter what the weather was. And though this was what we called “kleinlager,” a small camp, it often contained many more prisoners than the “grosslager,” the main camp. So we heard this shuffling from the kleinlager and the sound came closer and closer, and we looked out on the main thoroughfare, which went right past our barrack. And we saw in the grayness of this November morning, we saw these masses of people shuffling toward the roll call area, from which we could hear the grinding of the gas vans that were waiting. In Buchenwald and in all German camps, we always advanced five-by-five. That was in order to facilitate counting. And we saw these male individuals moving slowly and desperately, and knowing where they were going, toward the roll call area. And we knew that the night before some eight to ten thousand -- I don’t know the exact number -- of Jews had arrived from Hungary, and the prisoners within the camp who had something to do with the organization had been trying hard to accommodate these, to get food for them, but had not really succeeded because of the tremendous number. And then, the following morning…then they went to the gas chambers. They were all males. And there were some people so old that they couldn’t walk by themselves, but had to be supported by younger individuals, and there were some who were so young that they hadn’t yet learned to walk, and they were carried in the arms of their fathers, their uncles, their grandfathers. And they were all walking toward this annihilation. And on this particular day the smoke poured forth so voluminously from the crematory chimney that daylight didn’t break through! This happened between five and ten o’clock in the morning -- it took some time --and the sun would probably be up by nine. It would be set by four o’clock in the afternoon, but there was darkness over the camp the whole time, as indeed there should be for this event. Now I have read afterwards about this event. I have observed a little flame in the Holocaust monument in Jerusalem.

Q: At Yad Vashem?

A: Yes, which says, “Buchenwald, 8,609.” And it is a strange experience for me to stand in front of that and to know that I, personally, saw this happen. And as I saw it happen, it was horrendous to know what was happening, and not to be able to do anything about it. I told you before, as we conversed before our interview, that I felt strangely guilty about these things, because I was akin to the people that perpetrated this event, the general cultural context, and although I was a victim myself, somehow I felt that I was partially responsible. And I think at that time I decided that if I survive, I would remember and recall this to people who wanted to listen, because I knew that it was important for the entire survival of mankind to remember that this event did take place. Now mind you, what happened in Buchenwald, numerically, was a small little thing if you have Auschwitz in mind, but it was at least a step of the entire planned elimination of a people because of it’s cultural affinity.

Q: How do you, as a person within that general cultural context -- you shared certain love of culture, of art, of music, of the things that probably the educated German people held so dear-- how do you reconcile, can you reconcile, that the people that brought such great contributions to art and literature and music, how could they have done this? And how could the great masses of the German people stand by, apparently idly so, and let it all happen?

A: It’s nearly incomprehensible. I think that the German crime in the 1930s into the 1940s is so immensely much greater because they were what you said, they were cultural people. They were not savages. They had an education. They had created beauty in music and literature and the visual arts. They had accomplished certain things in human affairs as well, in the care of people. In the nineteenth century , there were some wonderful things happening in Germany. Yet an explanation for it is probably found in history, because Germany’s strategic location in the heart of the continent has given the German people, whether in a rather consolidated Germany, which is after Bismarck, or individual German states prior to Bismarck, a feeling that they ought to rule the continent. And when certain demagogic individuals get into the position of leadership, nothing is going to stop such individuals from accomplishing that goal. I think that was about to happen during the days of Bismarck in the 1860s and ‘70s, when Bismarck extended Germany into the north of Denmark, into the west into France, and into certain parts of East Europe. The tendency that has prevailed in German history to dominate Europe, the desire to dominate Europe, goes back at least a thousand years in history. It might have started with Charlemagne, although Charlemagne was not in Germany in the sense we think of it today. He was something between a Frenchman and a German, although his headquarters were in north Germany in Aachen, or Aix la Chapelle, as it is called. But it probably had its real beginning during the first great German emperor, who was Friedrich Barbarossa --Frederick with the Red Beard -- who really ruled Europe with a heavy hand, as medieval rulers could do. And this kept on and on throughout the centuries, and somehow the German people acquiesced! They allowed themselves to be ruled by such powerful individuals and maintained peace and quiet within Germany. It’s fascinating to think that the Germans never had a revolution. You know, the French had a revolution. Where would we have been without the French revolution -- I mean you and I, living in America --I mean we live at the grace of the French revolution. Such things didn’t happen in Germany, because it wasn’t proper to oppose the authorities! In the same way as the Germans did not develop a revolution, the Germans also -- the ones who sensed the unjust attitude of the Nazis -- said to themselves, I can imagine, “Well, they are the authorities. We are supposed to obey the authorities.’ And for that reason, there never was an active, fruitful resistance to the Nazis. The fact that they succeeded at the very outset to apprehend people like Schohout, there in my camp, also said something about it. They eliminated, they “concentrated,” their opposition. On the whole, an attitude of reverence for authority, I think, is a real German feature.

Q: May I stop you for a moment? The reverence for authority is a timely juncture. We’re all too familiar with the German cry, the Nuremberg trial and it’s statements of “I was just taking orders. I was just following orders.” How would you deal with the fact that if you’re saying the population did have a general reverence for authority, was this all a solid conspiracy? Did they want to have an opportunity where they could do their will and “just be following orders.’ Or am I reaching for something there?

A: I think that the ruling elite of Germany was, as a whole, involved in the conspiracy that implied the domination of all Europe at any cost -- at the cost of the Holocaust. I am sure of that. I have no doubt of this at all! I would have some doubt in terms of the German population at large. I have claimed earlier in this interview, and will claim it to my dying day, that the Germans knew what was happening, but I don’t necessarily imply that everybody was consciously participating in it. What I imply is that they were guilty of acquiescence, of acceptance of what was going on.

Q: Were they too afraid for their own safety to speak up?

A: They were not afraid only for their own personal safety. They were afraid of turning upside down the social order that existed in Germany. Germany was the most class-conscious nation in Europe, and it has continued until our day. You know, there’s a fascinating little phrase in one of Ibsen’s plays. Ibsen wrote about Hedda Gabler, who was an authoritative woman in Norwegian society, fully as German as Norwegian, I think as I look at it. Ibsen spent a lot of his time in Germany. But at the end of the play Hedda Gabler shoots herself, and a neighbor, a friend of the family, comes in just as this has happened, and he sees, practically the smoking revolver, and he sees Hedda lying on the ground there with a bullet in her head, and the last sentence in the play is, “One doesn’t do such a thing!” You don’t upset the established order! And I think that this is partly -- partly! -- to be blamed for the German acquiescence.

Q: Is that within the context of a convoluted value system that personal deportment, social deportment, had far greater value than doing the right thing, or if you will, obeying the Commandments?

A: Yes and no, because the proper social deportment was in the minds of the Germans part of obeying the Commandments. They obeyed the Commandments by doing what the authorities wanted you to do. You know, there was a time in American life, not very far removed, when we talked about law and order as the primary good in society. That, up to 1945, had always been uppermost in the minds of the Germans.

Q: That was a prominent feature in their society, while for us it was a transitory phenomenon of the last 15 years.

A: A transitory but very dangerous phenomenon.

Q: It’s perhaps fitting and certainly interesting that as we sit and speak here on the campus of St. Olaf College here in Northfield, MN, certainly an institution with a strong Lutheran background -- and I mean this question from a perspective of deep respect -- certainly Martin Luther and Lutherism have given the world many great contributions, but is there anything that you can bring to bear on this analysis in terms of what Martin Luther may have said once, how it may have been twisted and used by the Nazis to their own end, and does that somehow have a place within this framework of acquiescence, and how did it happen?

A: It’s a difficult question to answer in fairness to our own thoughts, and in fairness to Martin Luther. It was not part of Martin Luther’s formatory ideas to upset law and order. Martin Luther had great respect for the ruling houses of Europe. He saw to it at the first opportunity to come to an agreement with the ruling houses. So authority was in the mind of Martin Luther. Martin Luther’s theological writings are lucid and fascinating, but Martin Luther, the person, comes to light in a series of work that he called his “table speeches.’ Martin Luther was very fond of eating and drinking and he was very fond of speaking, and he gave “table talks” left and right throughout his life so that there are volumes and volumes of his table talks. In these table talks, he was much less cautious in what he said and much more impulsive, and he said, sometimes, very unbecoming things about the Jews. He was, I think, anti Semitic, which all of Europe was in those days. It’s a tragic phenomenon in European history that anti-Semitism prevailed, and Martin Luther was not very forward in this respect. He was what people were, in those days. In addition to that, Martin Luther was belligerent. He did not scorn the use of organized state power -- armaments and such things -- when it came to furthering his own cause. And Martin Luther’s contribution to the German peasant war, the subjugation of the peasants on behalf of Christianity, is a very black chapter in Lutheran history. But one thing that we must keep in mind when we try to evaluate Luther in this particular perspective is the time. What happens, happens within its own specific time-frame, at all times, and while Martin Luther was a progressive, a radical in so many respects, he was orthodox in other respects. I think that within very recent times, within the last ten, 15 years, some of the most progressive and fruitful discussions that have taken place between world Jewry and the Christian world have been the discussions between Europeans and American Lutherans and the Jewish people. And that shows that Lutheranism has broken out of its Affirmation-period time sequence and has moved into other things. But Martin Luther himself is partly, but not consciously, built of the attitude that prevailed in Nazi Germany. It is interesting, too, that the Nazi party was immensely much stronger in the purely Protestant parts of Germany.

Q: As opposed to the Catholic portions?

A: Than in the Roman Catholic parts of Germany, yes.

Q: I’ve been led to understand that Bavaria, for example, was a stronghold of Nazism, and I guess the popular denomination of Bavaria is strongly Catholic.

A: I think that’s simplifying the issue. The Bavarian population was not more Nazified than, say, the population of Prussia, which was 90% Nazified. The city of Munich was a stronghold of Nazism. The mob of the unemployed in this southern metropolis were the people who rallied behind Hitler, who also happened to live in Munich at the time. So I think that we are probably being unfair to the Bavarian population when we say that Bavaria was a Nazi stronghold. We should be more specific and say Munich. And it was the strong focusing of the evil social and economic issues in that vast urban center in the 1920s that happened to foster popularity for the Nazi movement. The Bavarian peasants, like peasants in many places, are too individual in their thinking to have accepted this new system without anything further.

Q: I don’t wish to dwell on Luther, but permit me one more question to follow up. It seems to me from my readings that in his early period he thought that the Jews were rebelling against Catholicism for the same reasons that he felt Catholicism had erred, or had made some wrong strivings. To that end, once he published his theses and made his break -- the Reformation was established -- I think some historians contend that he may have been angry with the Jews for not following him into the perfected Christianity that he was leading toward. Now whether this thesis is correct or not, do you feel that that might have some bearing on how the Nazis felt? Were they instruments, in their minds, of God’s punishment of the Jews? Or was it something totally different?

A: I think it was totally different. I would not imbue the Nazi elite with any kind of spiritual thought, for better or worse. I don’t think that that mattered at all. I think that to the Nazi elite, the Jews were an exceedingly convenient scapegoat for the ills of Germany. Germany was in a very bad state in the 1920s, and it was wonderful for the authorities to be able to say, “People, it isn’t your fault: It is the fault of the Jews.”

Q: May I stop you, respectfully, again? It seems to me, from time to time, that that must be the reductio ad absurdum of the whole Final Solution. If the Final Solution meant the liquidation of the entire Jewish people, from whence would the scapegoat continue to exist? Didn’t the Nazis see the folly of their own logic?

A: I don’t think they would have carried their thoughts that far. The Nazis were not strong in thought. They were action people, and I think that they probably felt that if they had carried out the Holocaust to it’s bitter end, there would be no longer any need for scapegoats. They would have developed the absolute perfect society. And I think that they were naïve enough to believe that the accomplishment of what they saw as an ideal was within the realm of possibility. It’s totally inconceivable that any society can develop into perfection, but they apparently thought they would.

Q: An associate of mine did her master’s thesis, roughly stated, that the Germans had some deep-seated “Angst”, something troubling deep within their psyche, that didn’t permit them to tolerate the “other’, and that the presence of these “racially inferior others” somehow threatened them so much. Obviously they were “for” aggression, and psychologists would tell us today that when an individual acts out aggression, it means that he or she is really hurting inside. Again, I don’t want to stretch out too far, but is there something on an aggregate social level that is a manifestation of the principles that we recognize on our individual human level?

A: That’s a profoundly philosophical question that’s very difficult to pursue. No doubt the Germans possessed a tremendous amount of “unrespecter,’ although we haven’t given a name to translate the term. But I think that the German angst in the 1920s, following their defeat in World War I, was a survival angst. I don’t think it was anything as profound as what you imply. I think that they were afraid of perhaps not getting enough to eat, of not having sufficient property, of not being able to retain the standard of living that they had acquired, be it a very simple standard of the countryside, or a more sophisticated one in the cities. I think, to me, that pursuing your friend’s notion -- I guess I’m getting more and more bitter as I deal with this -- I think that you are giving them somewhat higher motives, that you have something within you that craves…

Q: Is it a self-purging?

A: Yes, yes, self-purging. And as I said before, they were not ever great thinkers, as a people. The Germans were not thinkers. The French are very thought-oriented. In my opinion, the Germans were not. But certainly there was anxiety among the Germans. No question about it. A nation that had nearly depleted itself in one World War, that had been truncated, deservedly so, would have a difficult time to come to terms with its own self. There is something in that. But I don’t think that the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews was a result of that. I think it was an inexplicably fiendish way of exerting their authority, not only within Germany, but perhaps internationally. You know they had this notion about “the international Jewish conspiracy,’ and…

Q: They did have their “Deutschland uber alles,’ and they had to eliminate the “menace,’ so that they could rise…

A: Yes, yes, of course. At least in their theories, in the way they presented this. That’s the way Goebbels would have presented it.

Q: Do you think he believed what he said?

A: I think that from the outset this was a devised system, but I certainly think that by the time Goebbels had given his 500th speech, he probably believed what he said. I think we all…

Q: Self-hypnosis?

A: Yes, self-hypnosis. Yes. In fact, Goebbels not only did self-hypnosis, Goebbels was a master of mass hypnosis! His speeches, if you analyze the contents, are inane, but his manner of delivering them, and his playing on the weakest element within his audience, made him a public speaker of first rank, which he wasn’t. Listening with reason to what Goebbels or Hitler had to say, you ask yourself, “How could people go for it?” But they spoke that way at such-and-such a time. I’ll quote Ibsen again. In Ibsen’s Peer Gynt Peer is being chased by the devil at all times, and the devil reaches him at the crossroads, but Peer always slithers away. The next to the last time he meets up with the devil he slithers away again, and he says in Norwegian, in meter and rhyme which is very strong, but I have to just give it to you in translation, he says, “And that’s what the devil got, because he was dumb, and didn’t take his public into consideration.” Now Goebbels never made that mistake. Goebbels constantly knew what he was talking to, and he played on what the German people wanted to hear. There’s nothing nicer than wanting to hear that all of this economic misery is not your fault, it’s the fault of the Jews! The Jews owned seven percent of the German economy. Ninety-three percent was controlled by the German people themselves! And yet they were made to believe that their misery was caused by the Jews. Goebbels originally didn’t believe it. Rosenberg didn’t believe it. Hitler didn’t believe it.

Q: But it became convenient for them to believe it.

A: Convenient for them to advocate this particular point of view. And it was accepted, because they were the authorities! You believe what your authorities say.

Q: Let me turn your attention, literally, across the Atlantic ocean at that same time. Now we have the benefit of a book Professor Ross at the University of Minnesota has written. I believe the title is So It Was True. Perhaps you’re familiar with the book. In it he describes the reaction and the media coverage of the American Protestant community to the Holocaust or what they knew might be a Holocaust, or to what the situation was in Germany. My question would be to you, as you came to America, an individual not Jewish and obviously fair of feature, when you met your colleagues here in America, when you met your neighbors, and you had an opportunity to tell your story -- and I’m sure they were curious -- did you at all get into the subject of what did the people know, here in America? And if they did know anything, why didn’t they do more than they evidently did?

A: I haven’t been approached on that subject, specifically. I myself have often posed the question to American friends, “Why, when the reports reached the United States in the early stage of the war, 1940 and ’41, about the persecution of the Jews, didn’t America, which at that time was still really considered an authority even in Germany, do something?’ I’ve never been able to find the satisfactory response to this myself. I did find when I first came over, a tendency among certain people to disbelieve what had happened in Europe. They were conscious of the extermination of the small Norwegian Jewish population, of which 12 people survived out of 2,000. They didn’t doubt that at all. But I had given speeches in many parts of the Midwest and other parts of the country, and the inescapable destiny for an American speaker, you know, is to have to answer questions afterwards, and I have had people say, “You experienced these things. Tell us, how much of it is true and how much is not true?” and I have invariably had to disappoint these people and say that, “Whatever you have heard is true, and a great deal more is true.” And I thought of this when the film, The Holocaust was shown, which was, of course, a semi-fictitious presentation.

Q: I want to ask you, was it fictitious only to make it theatrically suitable entertainment, and was it also correct, substantially in what it documented about the Holocaust? Could you clarify that?

A: Yes, I think that its documentation on the Holocaust itself certainly was as accurate as it can become within the framework of that kind of presentation. I resented that presentation, personally, very strongly, because in all my contacts with Germans through my imprisonment and during the occupation of Norway, I never met anyone -- anyone!--who had any particular interest in humanitarian betterment, and there were characters presented in the film The Holocaust who were Germans who were exceedingly humanitarian. I remember looking at this and saying to my wife, “It wasn’t like that. I never met anybody like that!” And she said, “Are you sure that you didn’t?’ and I said, “I’m absolutely positive I didn’t!’ This I sensed And then another thing I sensed, some of my friends here on this campus saw The Holocaust film and said to me, “Was it as bad as that?” And I had to tell them that it was ten times worse than what this film could bring across, because there is no way that you can repeat in films the incredible moral vacuity that had become part and parcel of the personalities of the people who acted on order, or on inspiration. The semblance of that can’t be put across. And if you stand face to face with one of these individuals, you can sense that chill that is part of the individual, and that didn’t come across.

Q: So your criticism of The Holocaust as a docudrama, if you will, is that it perhaps portrayed the nominally concerned German citizen in too kindly a light.

A: Definitely!

Q: And you’re saying here there’s no way that perhaps some other docudrama could really convey the moral depravity of the perpetrators?

A: Absolutely. Absolutely. I don’t think you can do it. It’s an impossibility. And it would even be more of an impossibility to still make people look at it, because when you look at something for the sake of -- and I hate to use the word in this context -- “entertainment,” there has to be a breathing point. You can’t sit there for three hours, six hours, eight hours, and gasp! You just don’t survive as a viewer. So to me, the thing was a great disappointment, because I knew much more of it than what any viewer could have seen.

Q: And in the concentration camp where you were interned, would you say that it was as bad as the others, or perhaps nowhere as bad as the others?

A: I don’t think it was nearly as bad as Auschwitz. I don’t think that it was intended to be any better, but since, for some reason or other, Buchenwald was not destined by the authorities to be a receptacle for Jewish prisoners, with the exception of the Hungarians who came in there, for that reason it turned out to be better…the term “better” is wrong…not as bad as the others.

Q: The points then, that Dr. Ross raises in his book, that there was either a deliberate overlooking of the developments, or they just didn’t dig deeply enough, do you feel that’s a justified criticism of the American religious press?

A: I’m somewhat unprepared to answer. It would require a little more probing on my part. I don’t know if I’m getting close to it if I say that in the American Midwest, for instance, we have a large population that is of German background, and I’ve tried to imagine once in a while that the Norwegians, for some reason or other, had perpetrated the Holocaust, were the instigators of the Holocaust. How would all these kindly descendents of the Norwegians over here feel about this? They would probably, for their own emotional and spiritual survival, have to resort to doubt and say, “No, they can’t have done that.” And I can imagine that here in the American Midwest it must have been dreadful to have to acknowledge that your cousins once or twice or thrice removed were the perpetrators of the Holocaust. I had colleagues here at St. Olaf of German background, when I first came over here, who came to me and said, “Now we can get the information. You were there. Tell us what it was like.” And they were expecting me to say, “Oh, the Germans were nice to me.’ Of course I couldn’t do it, and some of them never talked to me again. I had one colleague who spoke to me when I first came over. He was my colleague for seven years. He never spoke to me again.

Q: Speaking of the Academic community, currently there is a number of well publicized professors who hold what might be termed revisionist views of history. The most infamous, I guess you could say, is a professor at the University of Chicago who holds out clearly that the Holocaust never happened, that it was a fabrication, a justification to a naïve world on the need for the state of Israel to come into existence. What reaction do you have to those statements and how would you respond, or how have you responded to colleagues who might have held, or do hold, these revisionist views?

A: Let me say first that I have been fortunate enough never to have met anyone who holds such absurd views. I have read about it and I’m fully aware of the existence of it, but I myself know from personal experience that the view is totally erroneous. I have no idea why a person would pursue such thoughts at all, when the evidence is so overwhelming. I mean the evidence of the existence of Dachau and Buchenwald and Auschwitz and Treblinka and Theresienstadt and whatever all these places are, and the mass graves that are around there, and the tens of thousands of eye witnesses. In America you don’t see too many survivors, too many people like me, who were there. But I think that in the academic community there will always be odd-balls who will follow this-and-that thought. In Nazi Germany in the early 1930s, before the Nazi regime had taken over, there was a professor of history in Schleswig-Holstein who established the theory that Jesus was not Jewish, but had been sired by northern Vikings who traveled in the Mediterranean, and he got a following! His name was Brantzen. He got a following with this incredible idea! Now the Germans were a Christian nation, and if the Nazi system was to survive, it had to come to terms with Christianity, and so Brantzen devised this incredible scheme that contradicts any kind of reason, but there was a following for it! I’d put the Chicago professor in the same category. He’s reaching for something, and I don’t know what his purpose is. I don’t know what he personally could gain from it, but I know so well that he is wrong, because I was there.

Q: Are others, people of Protestant or non-Jewish background like yourself who have been saved, who are survivors of the camps, have you ever gathered with them to reflect on your experiences?

A: Yes, many times. I am somewhat removed from them, living in the American Midwest. My fellow prisoners in Norway meet at regular intervals, and when I go to Norway, which I do every year, I meet with former prisoners and we discuss the issues. By the way, I should think that you, as a person of Jewish background, would enjoy immensely meeting with Norwegians, because the overwhelming spirit in Norway is exceedingly supportive of the Jewish cause, and I think of this on a very broad level, not only the well-known Norwegian support for Israel as a state but for the Jewish cause, and that comes from the fact that they were there. They know that it happened. You’ll find the same in Holland. The Dutch are very supportive of this. All the nations of Europe that were occupied by the Germans, that know what the Germans were capable of doing, have no problem. Hitler didn’t come to Chicago, so the professor there didn’t have a chance to experience first-hand what was going on! That’s one of the weaknesses of American society in its relationship to Nazi Germany. The Americans met the Germans when the Germans had been defeated, and while the Germans love to rule, they’re also very good at being “survivors.” When I came back to Norway at the end of the war, after my liberation, I became an investigator for the Norwegian judicial system, getting documents for the Nuremberg trials. I was a member of the Norwegian Army Intelligence Corps, I occupied a nice little apartment in a military camp where we had 15,000 German prisoners, and I had a German colonel who was my “boy” --and he was very happy to do it. It was exceedingly undignified, and there was no reason why he had to be like that, but those were the ones that the American troops met when they came to Germany. They were very friendly! They were jovial! The American population has not experienced the Germans as their rulers. No, they have never experienced that. I think that to be very servile is a very negative side, but when you are being served, you kind of look with favor at that sort of gesture.

Q: On the subject of your own liberation from the camp, can you put yourself back in those days, and tell us…

A: Yes, yes, yes, yes. I’ll do that. As the war approached its inevitable end in the spring of 1945, our camp became terribly over-populated. General Patton’s troops arrived in Buchenwald on the 20th of April and found 50,000 undisposed-of bodies. The first camp that came on the photo-wire was Buchenwald.

Q: Let me stop you there for a moment. The revisionist historians point to the need for crematoria to dispose of the bodies of people killed when the air raids would occur, and people were killed in the streets or their apartments, but here you’re saying Patton’s troops marched into the camp and saw 50,000 bodies unburied, and they must have obviously not been the victims of bombing, or so forth.

A: Oh, no. They were people who weighed 40, 50 pounds. They were victims of…

Q: It was clearly emaciation.

A: Yes, emaciation. Yes. And the photographs are available in every book on World War II. Patton’s arrival in Buchenwald is a well-established fact. Now, as the camp became over-populated, the conditions in the camp deteriorated rapidly. We hardly got any food at all, and we were all apprehensive about the very end, thinking that, “The Germans are not ever going to let us survive this camp. They’re not going to let us get out there and tell about it, so when the final defeat comes, we are going to become victims of the final defeat. We’re going to be exterminated.”

Q: As evidence.

A: Yes, as evidence. Yes, exactly. We were pretty well justified in thinking this way, so we looked toward the end with tremendous apprehension. I think I have said before that I had no sooner been sent to Buchenwald than I knew I was not going to survive. I knew I was going to die there, because from 800-2,000 people died every day, and why should I be saved? That was not in a deliberate extermination, that was simply because there was no way of coping with the issues of having all these people in confinement. Well, whenever a group was destined to be sent elsewhere to be exterminated, wherever, the announcement came on the address system. It said in German, “Prisoner No. 120, immediately to the gate.’ To be called to the gate meant to be exterminated. So one day, the 18th of March, 1945, the announcement came over the public address system that said in German, “All the Norwegians to the gate.’ We were 349 Norwegians.

Q: Were you gripped with terror?

A: Absolutely! But we shuffled up the walk to the roll call area anyway, wondering what was going to happen. And as we came up there we lined up, and the commander-in-chief -- his name was Pista, Oberfuhrer Pista, he was hanged in Nuremberg -- he came in, and with him were two people in dusty uniforms that we had never seen before. And as he came up to us, he was smiling. To see Pista frown was a horrible experience. To see him smile was even worse. And he said to us, as he walked around the ranks, now get this, he said, “How’s it going with you, my Norwegian friends?’ I’ve often thought of the American phrase, “If you have him as a friend, you don’t need any enemies!” And he said, ‘I have somebody who would like to talk to you.” And one of these two men in the dusty uniforms stopped in front of us and he said to us -- in Swedish -- “I have come to take you to neutral Sweden.” Now you might think that that was an announcement that would have filled us with joy!

Q: Your deliverance!

A: Yes, it was our deliverance, except for one thing. We didn’t believe it. We thought that this is a trick. We didn’t talk to each other, we couldn’t do that, you don’t talk on roll call. But we checked this afterwards. All of us thought exactly the same thing, “Why in the world don’t they tell it to us straight?’ And then he said something else and that struck us as very strange. He said, “But before we leave, I would like you to go back to your barracks and pick up your belongings.” That struck us as very strange because we thought -- and I know that we all thought the same --“If he had been part of the system, he would certainly have known perfectly well that we didn’t have any belongings.” We had nothing but our striped suits, and a number with a triangle, and our wooden shoes! And so in all of us, although we never talked about it, in all of us, this little glimmer of hope came that maybe this is on the level. And so we shuffled back to the barracks and into the barracks and out again and back to the roll call area. And there they were, the two in the blue uniforms, and Pista was gone. And then the same person said, “All right, boys,” in Swedish, “Now let’s go.” And that’s when it dawned on all of us that this is really true, because there wasn’t a German in all of Europe who would simply say, “Now let’s go.” Even if it were a German who liberated us, he’d come and say, “Achtung, achtung! Achtung1 Macht schnell sofort!” – “Step on it! Immediately!” But he said, “All right, let’s go.” So we walked under the gate, looked back at “To each his own” and “My country, right or wrong.’ And came out to the parking area, and there were 17 white buses, and they had the Red Cross and Swedish flags on them. So we stepped into the bus, and there was a little banner hanging by the door on each bus and it said, “Welcome to neutral Sweden!” It took us seven weeks to get there, and we were bombed on the way -- by the Allies (chuckles) --but on the first of May, 1845, we set foot on Swedish soil, and on the 8th of May was V-E day. And we had lived through it. (Stops, choked up.)

Q: How long did it take for it to sink in that you were free?

A: It didn’t take long. When V-E Day arrived we were in Stockholm, staying in an old chateau. And nobody checked on us. We went down to Kumstraat, which is a main street in Stockholm, and there were Swedish, American, British and Norwegian flags, and there were more Norwegian flags than there were Swedish flags, and there were hundreds of thousands of people roaring up and down the street. We, the Norwegians, were the heroes of the day because there were in Sweden, at that time, 80,000 Norwegians -- 30,000 were returning prisoners, the other 50,000 were Norwegians in exile -- and the Swedes pulled out all the stops to make us feel very good.

Q: How did the Swedish government, or the Swedish personnel, how did they orchestrate your release?

A: I know this from retrospective diaries that have been published. The feeing of the Scandinavian prisoners, the return to neutral Sweden for internment until the end of the war, was organized through Folke Bernadotte of Sweden, who was the international vice president of the Red Cross. It was part of the efforts that the Swedes, on an individual or on an organizational basis, tried to carry out as a neutral nation interested in European survival, and certainly it would be the same thing that Wallenberg was involved in. Folke Bernadotte negotiated face-to-face with Himmler. And Himmler was living in East Prussia at the time, separated from the Fuhrer headquarters in the bunker in Berlin. There was kind of a tug-of-war in Germany in the final phase, between Hitler in the bunker, Goering in Bavaria, and Himmler in East Prussia. Himmler had made a deal with Folke Bernadotte. Bernadotte had tried to get Himmler to stop the annihilation of the Jews and he had not succeeded. But his second point was, “How about the Scandinavian prisoners?” -- there were 30,000 Norwegians and 10,000 Danes in concentration camps -- “Will you let them go?’ And Himmler said, “If you will offer me asylum in Sweden, I will let you bring the Scandinavian prisoners to Sweden until the end of the war.” And Folke Bernadotte responded immediately and organized this bus system of liberation, and got an in-pass with Himmler’s signature into all the camps, and really, then, succeeded in bringing 30,000 of us into Sweden. Out of those 30,00, many, many hundreds died on the way, because they were already emaciated. They came from Freilichtungslager, they came from “nacht und nebel -- night and fog -- these camps in southwestern Germany. But it was through Folke Bernadotte that this happened, in the same way that Wallenberg, on his own initiative and with the support of a certain number of Swedish industrialists, began to travel into East Europe to try to liberate the Jews, and became a victim of the “nacht und nebel.” We don’t know what happened to Wallenberg. I’m afraid that I don’t believe that he is still living, although there have been, as you know, words coming out that he has been sighted by prisoners who have come out of Siberia. I find that very difficult to believe.

Q: If he were alive and therefore in prison for such a long period of time, what would have been the motivation?

A: Of the imprisonment, you mean?

Q: Yes.

A: That’s why I don’t believe it. I just don’t see the reason behind it from some Soviet point of view, or a Nazi point of view. I can easily see, from a Nazi point of view, that he might have been exterminated. He might have been captured and summarily executed. Why the Russians should have wanted to do it, I don’t know. I really don’t see the logic of that. But then I find it very difficult to see the logic of any totalitarianism, be it the far Left or the far Right.

Q: In conclusion, could you offer some thoughts on both the positive and the negative note? The negative note: Could it happen again? Could it happen here in America? And on a positive note: Has the world, has humanity learned anything from this, such that it might not ever happen again? What would you care to share with us?

A: I certainly think that if we are not sufficiently watchful and sufficiently keenly aware of what took place in the past, that similar, if not identical, happenings could occur. I think that if the social, political and economic conditions that prevailed in Germany following World War I would happen in this country that certain groups among us would take very drastic steps. We know there are extremist groups that are organized within the United Stares. Fortunately the total social, political and economic climate is not such that these groups can look for any great success, but we know that there are storages of arms and food, and that there are bunkers being built on private initiative in the United States. I think that the witch hunt that occurred in the United States during the McCarthy period in the ‘50s was awesomely similar to what happened in Germany. And it was a marvelous interference of destiny that Joe McCarthy was not able to carry on his work. I see tendencies in the south of the United States that are not by any means better than what happened in Germany. And I see a certain tendency toward a ruling of the world through military domination that prevails, not only in the East, but in the West as well. And I see that as exceedingly dangerous. On the whole, however, I think that the American fabric of society is such that within our country, it will not happen. And I think that if all of a sudden similar tendencies should begin to surface in Europe, I think we would be much more likely to interfere, and to interfere decisively, than we were 40, 50 years ago.

A: I’d like to thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us, in encapsulating this piece of history for the record, and for posterity.

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