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Jim Cacioppo interview 2/10/95

SWB: Jim, tell me how it is that you came to Mauthausen and

just take me right up to the camp the way you drove in and

tell me what you saw.

JIM CACIOPPO: On uh, the first day of the false report of

the war's end, we were, I th-th-, I think at Lens, Austria.

And I remember a wild celebration going on. The war is

over. And uh, there were many of the striped uniform, uh,

concentration camp people on the streets. And I was called

in to drive a half track for major Tuthill, two radio

operators, Major Tuthill and I, to follow a Russian staff

car, and we took off like mad, following the Russians, and

I'm not sure what day we were led to Mauthausen, and uh I

remember driving up the road to the camp, there were be ex

prisoners going up and down the road. I remember ten

Australian soldiers coming up to the track and asking us for

food. We gave them our rations, I remember them cutting

their mouths trying to lick the cans out, and we gave then

all the rations we had. Went on up the hill and parked just

outside the gate.

SWB: And then what did you do?

JIM CACIOPPO: Well we were billeted in what I guess were

offices for the camp or uh, guard quarters. And uh, I

remember the prisoners, their physical condition, so many of

them that, on the ground, couldn't rise, they had to be

lifted to their feet. A kitchen came that day or the next

and food was given to them. Many of them died from eating.

W-j-it was just too rich for them and, kitchens changed to a

thin soup. I remember there w- I remember bodies in places,

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I don't remember where. There were a lot of bodies in the

quarry, 100 maybe, 200 I don't know.

SWB: Did people talk to you, did they react to you?

JIM CACIOPPO: Oh they, yes, they were very glad to see us,

so many of them, uh, I remember being taken to the gas

chambers, led to the gas chambers, and uh crematoriums by

prisoners, and uh, I remember a pile of weapons, rifles,

pistols, and uh, I re- I remember a prisoner digging through

for pistols to give to us. And uh, it seemed to be a big

thing for him that he was, I remember two Polish men, who

had been prisoners, I-I was called out probably the next

morning, I was called out to guard the two Polish men and a

young boy who was fourteen, fifteen years old. They had

killed a, one of the German guards. And I sat out there in

the sunshine with the three of them for quite a while that

morning, and we were really enjoying being together. They

asked if the boy could go get some water, and I-I remember

thinking he won't come back, and he didn't, but I wasn't at

any trouble. It was forgotten. I don't think anything was

ever done about him. But I spent I think most of the

morning with those there and uh, my first encounter with

anything, anything like that that uh, I remember the rock

quarry, rock quarry was still 100 or 200 bodies in the

quarry, and I remember the engineers digging graves, and I,

I don't know where, I think on the road up to the camp, they

were digging three four five graves that were 100 to 150

feet long. I remember civilians from the surrounding

villages I guess, bringing wagon loads of bodies to the

graves and then placing them in the graves. Our army

chaplains uh giving the last rites to the bodies as they

were placed in there. I suppose we were there for... a

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week, I have no idea.

SWB: Were the prisoners who were alive, did you see any

emotion in them.

JIM CACIOPPO: Commotion?

SWB: Emotion.

JIM CACIOPPO: Emotion?

SWB: Or commotion.

JIM CACIOPPO: Oh yes. In the drive up to the camp we were,

we were welcomed. They were so glad to see us.

SWB: Did they say things to you, did they talk to you, did

they yell?

JIM CACIOPPO: Oh yes, they were yelling and, and, probably

yelling in Polish or German or whatever language they had.

I knew none of the languages.

SWB: When you sat with those three that day, how did you

communicate with them, or what kind of things passed

between...

JIM CACIOPPO: Just sign language and now and then, they'd

pick up one of my words or I'd pick up one of theirs, uh.

They wanted the little boy to get some water. And uh yes,

and that, that was the end of the little boy.

SWB: When they took you to the crematoria, tell me what

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that was like. What did you see there?

JIM CACIOPPO: I-I hadn't, no experience with a thing like

that and-and didn't see how it could happen, how-how a

people could be in any way associated with a thing like

that. I suppose there are people in this country that are

the same. It's uh, th-th-th the ovens and the gas chambers,

it was a horrible thing. It was new to al- to all of us

and... we knew of no mistreatment of people, mistreatment of

prisoners of war, or anything. And it was, it was

sickening, that uh...

SWB: We're just about to run out, so I want to put on

another roll of film.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: As you were walking around in the camp, did you see

any prisoners, any German prisoners?

JIM CACIOPPO: German prisoners. You mean, former guards?

Yes, I went through, I remember walking through the cell

blocks, and uh, seeing the, quite a few of the ex-guards had

been captured and were in the cells. In fact, the one that

was killed by the two Poles was killed in his cell. I think

he was shot, I'm not sure, I don't know.

SWB: What did, did you go in and look at any of them or

talk to any of them?

JIM CACIOPPO: The German guards? No. Uh, I was just full

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of hatred at the time and wanted nothing to do with them. I

guess I really wanted to see them dead.

SWB: What about revenge, other instances of revenge, did

you know of any, did you witness any?

JIM CACIOPPO: No.

SWB: When you came into the camp, can you tell me roughly

how many Americans there were and then how many prisoners

there were I mean, just a sense of the, of what it was like.

JIM CACIOPPO: Prisoners, uh r-, many many hundreds, uh.

And a lot of them I think had left the camp. Because we did

see them on the roads. We saw them in Lens, and I don't know

if they were from Mauthausen, Gousen, or where. Uh,

Americans, I don't know. I lived with them all the time.

SWB: When you guys came to the camp, what was your purpose

there?

JIM CACIOPPO: I really didn't know, I was just driving for

Major Tuthill, liaison, whatever it was and. I-I-I believe

major Tuthill was responsible for sending for hospitals,

doctors, kitchens, food. I-I remember kitchens a day or two

later or maybe the next day, I'm not sure.

SWB: Describe to me again the condition of the prisoners.

JIM CACIOPPO: Some of them seemed healthy. Th- very

emaciated, but a lot of them, capable of nothing but sitting

on the ground, lying on the ground, so relieved to be out.

To be, to be free, to be out of the barracks that they had,

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the shelves they had. I remember that there were I guess

conversations with some, or there-there must have been some

English speaking prisoners there. Because I remember being

with them. And, they- they were all ver-very friendly,

very... [laughs] they were all so indebted to us, uh, and...

I don't remember any children. I've-I've been asked before

but I don't, I don't remember children, except the boy that

I guarded, probably didn't notice others...

SWB: There weren't very many. Did you, did you feel a

sense of helplessness? Tell me about...

JIM CACIOPPO: It's- What can I do, what-what can we do?

It's just... my God what can I do about this? [long pause]

[END]

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