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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, Gausen, 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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