Interview with Milton Shurr, 2/10/95

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

MILTON SHURR: I forgot the exact dates, in the middle of April, whether the nineteenth or whatever. But I had been, I've been part of a displaced persons team. It was called DP 2, attached to first army. And we were the, I guess the showplace team of our first army, whenever somebody wanted to see a displaced person program, they brought them around to where we were. I joined the team in nineteen, well I guess, forty-four, in the fall, and uh, apparently there were some problems there, and the captain had done something horrible and they threw him out, and I became temporarily in charge of the camp until they found an American captain. At that time the team was composed of both American allied officers and American enlisted personnel. And uh, at that time uh, they were in Vervier, Belgium, which was probably several miles from the Malbadies, town of Malbadie, and uh we had several French officers, Belgian, Dutch, I think, attached to us. And uh we operated a program up until the time of the uh, so-called bulge. And uh we were ordered not to leave this displaced persons camp because it would have essentially started a riot in the town. And uh, we were lucky that the war, that not the war but the Malbadie pushed the bulge uh, collapsed uh, after a week and a half, when

the Americans were able to use their air power, but when the fog lifted from the Malbadie forest. And uh, then around the first of the year, I came down with uh, and we had, prior to that time, we had, during the period of the bulge, we either had air attacks or shelling because we had explosions in the courtyard and, which knocked out our utilities there. We had about 500 displaced persons of

different nationalities. And uh so we had to dig slit trenches and so on. And bring in water, and so on, to keep things going. So we had a lot of uh-g-good experience in disaster in emergency problems. Then I came down with Hepatitis, about the first of the year, and uh, was sent first to Paris, then England, for a period of treatment convalescence. And I returned to the uh, to rejoin the group, in April. And uh, I learned that our particular detachment was in Vetzlar, Germany, in a large uh barracks area, taking care of displaced persons. The time I arrived, which was probably the middle of the day, I had heard, when I got there, I had heard that they had left, for Buchenwald. So I got transportation to Buchenwald, and arrived there,

around dinnertime. And uh, I was made officer of a guard for the evening, and estab- was established in uh, in one of left side of that, uh, the typical concentration camp en trance. You'd, you-you'd see a two story building with a tower and uh there were offices on each side and uh I was sitting in one of the offices of one of the SS personnel, and uh, there was a lot of coming and going of third army personnel, and uh, I quickly learned that uh, a lot of the enlisted personell and others of third army were uh seizing all of the lampshades that were made out of uh skin. Uh, those, that was one of the hobbies of Ilsa Koch, who was the wife of the agita [?] in charge of the um concentration camp. And uh, so I managed to save a few pieces, walked them up at the desk, knowing that eventually there would have to be some criminal investigation. And these were saved and turned over later to uh the personnel. Uh there was a lot of confusion, uh, the uh camp, like all big camps seems almost to run itself. Uh by decentralization, and uh, the uh, each barracks had a nationality group. And they were horrible places, as you've seen pictures, you know, you

had two, uh, a two-story set of bunks in which they put about six people in a little slot of maybe about eight feet, uh, wide. And almost if somebody turned I guess the whole people would have go, you know, uh turn with them. Uh they were horrible places and they smelt to high heaven. And uh, I don't know whether we had the same uh kapos as they were called as the Germans had, but obviously uh, many did pick new-new people. And I used to meet with this group every morning, and they'd tell me what the problems were in the camp. About food, about clothing, and so forth and so on. And many of these ex-prisoners would grab a bicycle, motorcycle, or whatever, and they would, they were chasing around all over the area. And they would tell us about a um, a barn full of shoes, a uh, a uh warehouse full of flour or wheat or whatever. And then the seargant and I would go down uh his pick up truck, look it over, if we thought it was worthwhile, we then would have one of our trucks. Now, the, our team uh had as its basic transportation, two jeeps, uh with two trailers. And uh, we'd had a lot of experience using captured German equipment, French equipment, what not. And so uh, the uh, these fellows managed to get two diesel five-ton trucks, and uh, stole or borrowed, uh, tires and what not. And we established our own, little uh garage. And uh, what we had really was kind of a hot car racket. They would spray the captured stolen German trucks and spray them olive drab and we would then put some fake ordnance numbers on and we were off and running. Uh, and uh, you know.. Actually it got so bad that I had civilian people

coming in and saying they lost their car and uh more than once I would discover a car had blue paint under the olive drab and we would return it to the Germans. About, we would go down and, and uh, to the various town, or village, and take whatever we thought we could need. And we had the

highest priority after the United States army. The United States army wasn't seizing any food or clothes, and so we literally took everything we had. And in the period of about, oh, two months or so, we pretty much cleaned up the area between Leipzig and way down into the forest area. Uh, and uh, you know, it was, and we had a lot of complaints. The captain would come to me and, say well I shouldn't do that, and so forth and so on, and uh, I would disregard him, I just felt so strongly that people who had suffered as much as these unfortunate uh people and just by luck survived, shouldn't, you know, have any more problems. And uh what happened of course at Buchenwald, there were 15000 survi vors, over a period of the several years in the camp, which first took prisoners and uh were criminals, and then uh, various displaced persons, uh, for political reasons or

others. And they were kept there. During that period, I think about 50,000 had died according to the inmates. And uh they did have a, at one time, a little exhibition of uh floats and other things that they'd put up and these pictures are in the museum, Holocaust museum. When our, when we arrived, of course there was confusion. And uh my first, our first concern, perhaps the captain or somebody ordered, a uh, field hospital, to come in and spray DDT which brought the typhus epidemic under control. People were dying at the rate of 300 a day from malnutrition, starvation, or disease as the case may be. Gradually the thing got under control. Now everybody's always excited about the heaps of, dea-, of the dead that were seen in most of these camps, and uh they were horrible cause you say the evidence of starvation. Uh, people had about 600 calories a day which was enough to keep them alive for six months or less, depending on uh disease and other problems. Luck...

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

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

MILTON SHURR: Oh yes. Well uh-th-p-and in Buchenwald, at any rate, the pile of bodies was really occasioned by the fact they ran out of coal. And uh, so they couldn't have been consumed in a crematorium. And the captain apparently got the burgermeister and uh some of the townspeople to come in and help bury the bodies, uh, if, they probably used bulldozers some other things. Uh, but it was a horrible looking thing and of course that, that caught all the interest, pictures that saw it. It was uh, it was a terrible thing, the, you know, slow starvation, people worked in the quarries, and uh, they assembled uh, in Buchenwald uh, binoculars, small arms and things like that. There was no factories there. Uh, so the, the people who had tended to survive either had jobs peeling potatoes or some access to the uh kitchen or whatever, so they, they got by. The uh, lot of very important personalities, and political scene like Leon Blum, and one of the royal family of Italy uh, were political prisoners there at one time. And it had some criminals there too, and, it wasn't a very pleasant place. Um, I operated, I was able to survive really. We worked, I w-, um, I worked, anyway, about sixteen hours a day trying to find food, and I probably made a mistake, I should have relied more on the federal government. But many of the other camps used to come to our camp to get bread and other things because they just

couldn't handle. Uh, I operated on the basis of, of really uh, decentralization of authority. Um, one of my colleagues

who was senior to me uh, spoke German, very fluent German, and he was listening to everybody's problems. And uh, as a result uh, he became very much emotionally upset and became insane, and uh, had to be taken away. He came back, but he never made it, uh, he never recovered. And I refused to talk to people. Everybody, each one had the most horrible personal story, they, they were looking for loved ones, relatives and so on, and uh, I, I would say, you're just going to have to wait until Red Cross or somebody else gets in the camp. And uh I just refused to get into individual case work, uh services. You can't, you couldn't and do... what I had to do was just keep people alive till such a time as they can be repatriated. And of course, immediately, uh, the Germans were released to go to their hospitals or wherever. All the allied personnel, there were French, German, English, a few American aviators who were caught out of uniform. All were returned to their respective, uh, forces. And we were left in a camp with Russians, Poles,

Eastern Europeans of various descriptions, and at a later stage, those who wanted to go west, particularly the Poles could elect to do so, or if they wanted to return to their own country. And it was, sort of all the educated, of course, wanted to go west, the less educated wanted to back to their land. And uh then we, later on, we had a new infusion of people who were Russians and Poles and, and Yugoslavs, Hungarians, who wanted to go back east. So we had a shifting population, but it was always about the same size.

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

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

were using the new or the old, but I was using people who would tell me what the problems were, where there were sources of food that they had learned, and so forth and so on. And this was my intelligence network. Uh, when the Red Cross came in I said well, your job is to work with the

people to answer their questions and problems concerning uh the location of relatives. The joint distribution committee came in and, I've hav- I having worked in Oklahoma City uh, as head up of the Jewish community council there, you know, I knew all about welfare and coordination planning and the joint distribution came in, I said great, I said, uh, we have a uh large barracks full of almost 2000 Jewish children, and uh, I haven't even seen them. And this is your job. And I fixed them up an office, and typewriters, so on, same thing with the Red Cross. So I attempt to decentralize what went on, and the result is, I concentrated on what I thought were the high priorities, of health and safety and nutrition for the groups. And I probably made a mistake, I probably should have relied more on the uh army to supply us with supplies instead of knocking myself out, but that's water over the dam. Finally, about, we were there from April and the whole area of Thoringia, province of Thoringia, was turned over to the Russians according to agreement of uh July first. So that, oh, sometimes about, be- sometimes in June, we were running out of food and uh I went to the army headquarters which was right outside of Weimarr, and uh, talked to the colonel, in charge of supply and I said that we had exploited the area on our own for oh three months, and we were running out of food and we needed some help. Well, he said, I, we can't do anything for you. So I said, well, I, the only thing I can do is open up the gates and let these people go out into the town of Weimarr and seek whatever they want and so on. And I said you will

be responsible for their public safety of the town. Now he got the message and we got the food, but this was the, uh, I was a, I was a second lieutenant then promoted to first lieutenant, but you know I, I had had my fill of all these uh, so-called lieutenant colonels and colonels uh, who uh, really, hiding behind rules and so on, and uh I had other experiences. But this one was the last major one I had, and I had no compunction about it. I said, if you, if you think you want to send me home in irons I'd be glad to, I said, I worked like a dog, and I said, I'd be glad to get some rest. And so you know we prevailed and uh that's what happened and uh so, but it was a real problem, and uh, it was uh, and as I look back apparently I never realized that uh, this famous, what's the name, uh, ... spokesman for the concentration camp, what was that Weisel, Wiesel, can't pronounce the name... um, you know it was also one of my children, you know, I never even laid my hands and eyes on him, I just couldn't, didn't have the time, and uh, this is pretty much how you could survive in a uh you know, running a city of people, uh all injured by indirection. But we were very experienced personnel, for example, uh, we had

requisitioned a ton of captured German cigarettes, and we used that to pay the Polish displaced persons who would man our two uh diesel trucks that we carried food, and uh, we had a young man who was the son of a Czech family promi nently in the steel business, uh who uh was edu-, who was brought up with a Scotch nanny and he spoke impeccable English, spoke uh Polish, Russian, German, whatever. And he was our interpreter, and uh working with this Polish group. So this is pretty much, you know, how we, how we got along, and uh...

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

left by the SS.

MILTON SHURR: Uh no, I had heard that there were a few dogs left by the SS, and the surviving prisoners who uh, were more able, they just strangled the dogs. Uh, everybody talks about liberating Buchenwald. Well, Buchenwald was like the, like Rome, you know, during the days of the Vandals. When the SS heard that the first or third army was

coming down the road, they just took off. And uh, and the Americans just walked in, and then they walked out again. So even-he-so when people talk about liberators, uh you know, it really is in this sense, for example, was I a liberator, I wasn't a liberator, I was a, one of the people assigned to create order and stability in a situation that was very chaotic. And uh, we had so much good experience in the previous year running camps and so on, that everybody knew their job and, you know, it was an efficient, small but efficient team. We had some Polish, we had some rather Ukrainian hangers-on, we had about ten, uh, Dutch people, mostly young men, who, for the lock of it, worked with us, you know, just to be with us. It was great fun for them. So we had this informal group running the camp and everybody had a good time doing a job. They worked hard and uh, this is how, how we operated. And uh, I don't know, our team could have handled a large camp like Dachau or something else because uh Buchenwald was relatively a small camp, although had 15,000 survivors, but, you know, it was small by comparison to these other camps in terms of physical properties and so on. Uh I had a number of little things that I had picked up which I turned over to the Holocaust Museum.

[END]

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.