

**Interview with Mary Wood  
July 14, 1995**

**Beginning Tape One, Side A**

Question: Just so I can hear your voice on the microphone, tell me where you live.

Answer: Oh, **[indecipherable] Webster, New York**, six miles east of **Rochester**.

Q: Uh-huh. You came a long way. Yeah. How many hours it take to drive?

A: I left there at quarter after seven.

Q: **AM?**

A: Got here -- yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Got here about 2:30 I think. If I hadn't gone and turned the wrong way when I got off the thruway, I'd have been here earlier.

Q: Okay, here we are. This is **Nina Ellis**, interviewing **Mary M. Wood**. It's July 14th, 1995. We're in **West Park, New York**. Please tell me where were you born, when were you born and where did you grow up?

A: September fifth, 1917, **Alexandria Bay, New York**. I grew up in **Alexandria Bay** til I went away to nurse's training.

Q: Uh-huh, where did you go to nurse's training?

A: **Syracuse, New York. Krause Irvy**.

Q: Hospital?

A: Mm-hm, **Krause Irvy Memorial Hospital**.

Q: Uh-huh. Did you always want to be a nurse?

A: I really don't know. Just how it was. My sister was one, so that -- I sort of followed in her footsteps.

Q: Uh-huh. And wh-when -- when and why did you decide to go in the service?

A: Well, when the war star-started, I thought that's where I should be.

Q: Did you have other members of your family in the service?

A: Oh, my father had been in the service. His brother had been in the service, but that's all.

Q: Then it was just the thing that --

A: Thing I thought should be done.

Q: And where did you -- when did you go in?

A: July eighth, 1942.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I was going to **NYU**, so I waited til the semester was over, before I went in.

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. You finished your nurse's training?

A: Mm-hm. And then I was -- I did post-graduate work and then I was working and going to **NYU** at night.

Q: Uh-huh. Working as a nurse?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Uh-huh. In a city?

A: In **Queens**, out in **Jamaica**.

Q: Uh-huh. And then you did basic training, starting in July? No, you don't do basic any more.

A: I didn't.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I got away with it.

Q: How come?

A: I don't know.

Q: Don't most people have to?

A: Usually they do. But they just sent me down to **Fort Dupont** in **Delaware** and that was it.

Q: Huh. And how long were you there?

A: Let me see, I went there in July, was there til November.

Q: Mm-hm. 1940?

A: Two.

Q: Two.

A: Uh-huh.

Q: And then, tell me --

A: In '42 we went to **Dix** and **Kilmer** and then I went to **Africa**, and I was in **Africa** from January til November in '43. In November I came home and where'd I go next? **King -- Dix** I think it was.

Q: You were in **North Africa** with the third army?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: 32nd station hospital.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: In **Tlemcen**, about 100 miles outside of **Oran**.

Q: Outside of what?

A: **Oran**.

Q: **Oran**?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Uh-huh. That was the first time you were overseas?

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: What was that like?

A: We had a station hospital, so we got the boys directly back from the -- from the aid stations and what have you. So that's what we took care of, that.

Q: Uh-huh. And then they were going home from there?

A: Mm-hm, most of them went home.

Q: Uh-huh. Badly wounded, then?

A: Mm-hm. Some were flown back. Some went by ship, in the hospital ships.

Q: Mm-hm. Well, when did you meet up with this group here **[inaudible]**

A: That was in -- what month was that? Must have been November of '44. November of '44.

Q: In --

A: In --

Q: In **England**?

A: No, no. Met them in **Charleston** -- I think it was **Charleston, North Carolina**, if I remember right, I --

Q: Oh, you came back after **Africa**?

A: Yeah.

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And then you went over with them to **England**?

A: Yeah, **England, France, Austria, Germany**, what have you.

Q: Well tell me about the experience at -- at **Mauthausen**. What do you remember when you arrived?

A: Well, well, the smell. The bodies, the smell. And I was in the operating room and we had to repair the damage that they had done experimenting on different people.

Q: Really?

A: Mm. They used to -- well, [**indecipherable**] they delivered babies and held them up and killed them in front of the mothers. They would maybe cut off a leg for practice and we got some of those to take care of. But mostly they were nothing but skin and bones. There wasn't too much to do, surgically for them. We didn't have too much to do there.

Q: Hm. Were you able to talk with those people who had been --

A: No. See, the girls were out in the wards, I wasn't on the wards, I was in the operating room, so I really didn't get to talk to the people.

Q: Mm-hm. How did you know what had happened to them?

A: Well, from things we heard. Mostly from the men that worked in the offices and some that worked up at **Mauthausen** where the **POW's** were -- our -- not our **POW's**, the Germans, the **SS** troopers and that type of thing, from them -- the stories we got from.

Q: What was a typical day like for you there? That was in June of '45? Or May of '45?

A: May of '45, yeah, May and June.

Q: You arrived shortly -- in early May, am -- am I right about that?

A: You know, I can't remember the dates. We went to **Germany** first. Then the men -- after the war ended, the men -- the officers and enlisted personnel went over to Camp **Gusen** and liberated it and we were a couple of weeks later before that -- we went over. They didn't want us at first. So it was a voluntary thing whether you wanted to go or didn't want to go.

Q: Was it much of a choice for you? Did you have any --

A: No, we all said yes, we'd go. There wasn't any -- I don't think -- nobody backed out, everybody went.

Q: And what would a typical day like be for you? Do you remember?

A: Getting on the trucks. Going to **we** work. Being sprayed with **DDT** for bugs and --

Q: Every day?

A: Yeah, every day when you got there you'd get sprayed. Down your pants, up your shirts, down your shirts, every place they sprayed you so you wouldn't get any fleas or bugs or what have you. In the operating room, repairing things that they had done to the people. That type of thing.

Q: Mm-hm. Long days, were they long days?

A: I don't think so. 12 hour day.

Q: Mm-hm. And then you would go back?

A: Oh, we had a house, we lived in a house. Was three or four houses, everybody was split -- split up into a different house. And we lived there. We ate in the mess hall. And we met a lot of nice people, made a lot of nice friends.

Q: What was it like for you women in the evenings? What would you talk about, what would you -- you'd already been to **Africa**, but a lot of the women had never --

A: No, they hadn't -- that was their first trip, yeah.

Q: Yeah. What kinds of things did you talk about in the evenings?

A: Gee, I don't remember. I really don't remember.

Q: When -- when were you discharged?

A: Oh, December 12th, '45.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: That was the official date, but we left in September, because we were in **Camp Polk, Louisiana** and we were discharged there.

Q: Did you spend the whole summer in **Europe**?

A: Yeah, we got back in August.

Q: Were you at **Mauthausen** the whole time?

A: No, when we first went in, we went over to **England**. We went to **France**. We went to **Germany**. And we went to **Austria**. Then we went to the camp.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: We had a -- a tent hospital in **Austria** before we moved to the camp.

Q: Uh-huh. Yo -- **Mauthausen**, you mean by the camp.

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm. No, **Gusen**.

Q: Oh, **Gusen**.

A: There's two, **Gusen** and **Mauthausen**.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: They were very close together.

Q: Mm-hm. And you worked at both?

A: No, **Gusen**.

Q: Oh, only **Gusen**? Oh, I'm confused then, I thought you were at **Mauthausen**.

A: No, maut -- well, as I remember **Mauthausen** was only where the -- there was an infantry group that was in there, men, and they had the prisoners there. I don't think there was a hospital up there. I don't remember it if there was.

Q: And were they bringing then the survivors, the patients who'd been in **Mauthausen**, were they bringing them down to where you were in **Gusen**?

A: No. I don't remember a camp -- as -- the **DP's**, what have you? No, that's displaced person. But I don't remember them bringing anybody down. If they did, I don't remember it.

Q: Mm-hm. So the people that you were caring for had all been at **Gusen**?

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: And what -- what became of those people over time?

A: I don't know, cause they were still there when we left. Cause when we went in -- when the men went in, the Germans had released them and they were out in the fields and they had to go get them and bring them back. Because I remember they were digging in the fields and ate raw potatoes and it made them deathly ill, because they weren't used to



eating. And when they did feed them, they'd always save part of it under their pillow, for fear they wouldn't get anything any more. And there was some musicians there and they used to play at mealtime, up on the stage, the ones that were able to play while we ate. But I don't remember eating in that dining room. We were talking about a lot of things. I remember that I -- remember --

Q: Di -- Were you ever able to have conversations with those people at all?

A: No. I never did, no. Cause see, the operating room was here and we looked out the window and was -- the mess hall was there. I did go around in some of the wards to see the people, and never talked with any of them.

Q: Hm. And y -- and there were only men there? You didn't see women and children?

A: Yeah, there was women there. I didn't see any children, yeah. Cause we -- I operated on women.

Q: Because you what?

A: We operated on some of the women.

Q: Oh, you did?

A: Yeah.

Q: Uh-huh. And they were in -- they had suffered the same kinds of things?

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm. They tell you there was a -- nearby there was a munitions factory, in the mountain, inside the mountain.

Q: Hm.

A: Where the -- the people used to go in there to work. As long as they were able to walk, they had to go there to work. They went there from the camp to work. Then there was

also places where they actually made lampshades there out of s -- human skin. And the -- the big furnaces were there where they'd -- whew it's hot there.

Q: Want to take a break?

A: Where they burned the bodies.

Q: -- the layout.

A: Oh, I can't remember. All I can remember seeing that big oven with the doors open. There was -- if I remember rightly, there was three of them. Did they tell you about the SS trooper that they killed? The -- we had natives, or whatever you want to call them -- natives -- people that lived in the town came in to work afterwards. They worked in the kitchens and in the dining room and what have you. And there was one German SS man and those prisoners, who were nothing but skin and bone, killed him and hung him up on a fence. I have a picture of that at home.

Q: Did you see it happen?

A: No. And there was -- the chaplain and his assistant doing all the burials you know, and they had big, long trenches with bodies in long, long lines.

Q: And they were doing that the whole time you were there?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Every day?

A: See, a lot of them died at first. As a matter of fact, you couldn't tell the live ones from the dead ones, they looked -- that's how bad they looked.

Q: Before you went in there, did -- had you heard about that at all, did you --

A: No. I hadn't. They just said we were going to a concentration camp. The colonel said, "You can go or you don't have to go. It's up to you, whatever you want to do."

Q: Did he tell you what it was going to be like?

A: If he did I don't remember.

Q: What was -- were you shocked when you got there?

A: Oh, sure. When you don't know the difference between a live person and a dead one, it's pretty awful. Grisly.

Q: When you got out of the service, what -- and in your later life, what -- what do you think has been the impact of that experience on your life or --

A: I can remember I was in **Atlanta**, going down to see a friend. And we went to the movies and there happened to be -- remember -- oh, you don't remember. There was newsreels then. And one of the newsreels showed the -- a concentration camp and a guy behind us said, "That's all propaganda, that never happened at all."

Q: An American guy?

A: And that, you know, that disturbed me a little. They had to hold me in my seat, because I was ready to get up and punch the person, but -- and then even now, you hear people say it didn't happen, but it did. Very much so.

Q: Do you have family members [indecipherable]

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Do they ask --

A: I have one son in the Air Force and one son in the Army. And one son is in -- working for Uncle **Sam** as a park ranger. He was in the Air Force in **Vietnam**.

Q: Did they ask you about your experience a lot?

A: Well, they've seen my pictures and what have you.

Q: You took a lot of pictures while you were there?

A: I had a lot, real lot and somebody said, "Well I'll print them for you, I'll have them cop -- printed for you." I never saw them. I lost about six rolls of 36 -- 35 millimeter film.

Q: Before you got back?

A: Mm-hm. When we -- I had to go on an inspection trip in -- in **France** while they were setting up the hospital, getting things going, I went on an inspection trip with two or three other officers. And I took a lot of pictures then, all through **Germany**, all the devastation that was on. That was before the war was over. As a matter of fact, I was in the hospital in -- in **Brussels**, what was the name of the place? Can't remember now, but I'm sitting down to eat in this dining room. Woman next to me said, "Aren't you **Margaret Wood**?" "Yes." She was one of my teachers in school. She was a Red Cross worker. Another time in **France**, walking down the street, a boy I went to school with was there. Twice I ran into people in -- three times, once in **England**.

Q: When you look back on that experience, was it a good experience or a hard experience, or how do you characterize it?

A: It was good and it was hard.

Q: What was good about it?

A: The things you saw, the people you met, the things you did, your experiences, your friends. We've all been back and forth for years, so --

Q: You've kept in touch with a lot of the women that you served with?

A: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Q: Yeah. When you say the -- the things you saw, s -- one of the good things about your experience was the things you saw. What do you mean by that?

A: Maybe other cultures and the way other people live and the things that we have that they don't have. That type of thing. The beautiful buildings that were left, the beautiful cathedrals that you saw. I remember going to mass and -- this was back in **Africa**. We went in to mass and we sat down, but you don't do that, because everybody has their own pew, their own chair. They bring their own chair and their own kn-kneeling benches, so were sitting in somebody else's seat [**indecipherable**] sort of. It wasn't the same in **England**. I don't remember going to church in any place else except for -- we went in churches and saw the cathedrals -- some of the cathedrals and things. Those were beautiful things.

Q: Did they hold services every week?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: We didn't have a chaplain for -- not a Catholic chaplain, we had the Protestant minister. And if I remember rightly, they had a mass or -- in **Gusen** that they never -- they hadn't had one in years and everybody went, you know, that could. All the inmates went. I never can think of what to call them.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Patients I would --

A: Yeah.

Q: Survivors, [**indecipherable**] yeah. Is there anything you want to say? Is there any --

A: I can't think of any.

Q: What do your kids ask you about, from that period, and has --

A: They -- they look back at the -- my scrapbook and the pictures I have in the scrapbook and things like that, and -- "Ma, did you look like this 50 years ago?" Hard to think you changed that much. Think the only person hasn't changed is **Sherry**. I'd had know her any place, but the rest -- oh maybe **Dotty** too. And **Feldhusen**, the three of them. The rest you don't recognize.

Q: Time does strange things.

A: Doesn't it?

Q: Yeah. Good.

A: Okay?

Q: Great.

A: Good.

Q: This is the end of tape one, side **B**, this has been **Mary M. Wood**.

A: Do you want the serial number there? Do you take the serial numbers or not?

Q: Sure.

A: **N723463**. Don't ask me my social security number, but that I know.

Q: You remember that one.

A: Well, you had to write it every time you wrote a letter or anything.

Q: This is July 14th, 1995, **West Park, New York**.

**End of Tape One, Side A**

**Conclusion of Interview**