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Alfred Sundquist interview 2/13/95

SWB: Tell me how you came across a camp during World War II.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well the camp was uh [ahem] about two or three miles from town called Ludwigslozen. And I was with 18th Airborne headquarters at that time, under General [ahem] Matthew Ridgeway. Now um, we're told that uh our troops are advancing, had overrun a small concentration camp. And being a physician and a major, I was told to look into the situation and write up a report on it, and take whatever action was necessary, which I did. Part of my job was uh along the field of public health, so I might be on that concentration camp for a couple of days, and then I might be at a hospital where there were 1500 cases of Typhus, not typhoid but Typhus fever. People with a temperature of 105 for a couple of weeks. And um went to other hospitals, um, one hospital had a German general in it an- got captured him, [laughs] and took him back to army headquarters alone[?]. That was essentially the uh type of work that I was doing and concentration camp was a part of that.

SWB: Had you heard about them, did you know what you were going to find?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: No I had no idea until I got there and saw what was going on.

SWB: Describe it to me, take yourself back and tell me how you approached and what you saw.

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ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well I [ahem] well I [ahem] I had a jeep and driver and we drove up to the concentration camp where the barracks were, of course the Germans had left, had flown, and uh, looked around and I believe that the whole camp was only on about three or four acres and there was no uh, there were no gas ovens or anything like that. Uh, there was one place there where the dead were piled up like cardboard, and they wore these uniforms which were striped. [Ahem] And there were other people who were near death from starvation. So apparently I don't know why the people were sent there, I didn't get involved in that at all, uh, in the barracks, as I recall, now I'm 88 years old and what, and this happened 50 years ago, but damned if I can forget it.

It's so, it had such an imprint on my memory. The uh, the wire in the beds of the barracks was barbed wire, how they could sleep on barbed wire I'll never know. [Ahem] Starvation causes a loss of teeth and a swelling of the legs. And this was very apparent in those that were still alive. And uh there was cannibalism there and in the barracks I saw evidence of liver having been eaten, human liver, they made a, opened up the chest and the lower abdomen and got out the liver, they could eat the liver when their teeth were gone, but they couldn't eat anything else without teeth. And uh, [Ahem], shall I just continue...

SWB: Did the people who were alive, what did they do when they saw you?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well there were two or three women there who were in very good shape, and they were smiling and seemed to be very happy. I think that's probably because they saw someone in an American uniform, and because they were free now. Um, there were a few uh, they were lying on

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the ground, a few of the inmates they were lying on the ground, in the last stages of starvation and death and uh, um, I had to write up a report on this, and do you want me to continue this way [ahem] um so the question was what did I do about it. Well, I wrote up a report, went back to my headquarters, and told them that [Ahem] made my recommendations and said that the town of Ludwigslust is very nearby and I said- and they had apartment houses there and I suggest we kick the Germans out of the apartment houses and move the concentration camp people in there and feed them, and we had to feed them very carefully, just give them liquids, otherwise you give them too much they'll, you'll kill them. Well actually we lost 25 percent of them. [Ahem] there was a, a captain, a Dutch captain and he was a Lunden Pole, a l- uh I mean a Polish captain, and he was a Lunden Pole, and of course of the Russians, just loved to get ahold of them \_\_\_\_\_ Poles, Lunden Poles. And uh I said now look, I'm gonna have to leave here tomorrow, and I want somebody in charge, and I'm gonna put you in charge of this place. He said, but look, look at the uniform I have on here, I can't be in charge with this uniform like this. And I said, don't worry about that, I had some enlisted men with me, I said, look, go over to that apartment house, and get this, bring this man with you and get him five suits of clothes and make sure they fit him and look well on him. So they did that. And uh, then uh, they came back the next day and the 82nd airborne division got involved in this. 82nd airborne was one of the divisions that was connected with

the 18th airborne Corps which I was a member. And they had a funeral for the ones that died, and everyone in the town of Ludwigslust, I imagine the town was about ten, twelve thousand people. Everyone there had to attend the funeral. The men had to dig the graves, and there must have been

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about uh, oh I'd say about 30 or 40 graves there, and the graves were dug with such precision, that you wouldn't find an inch difference in the measurements of the different graves. And uh, so they [Ahem] they were buried there and the graves were filled with, and they put wreaths on the graves. I had, I got a lot of pictures, took a lot of pictures of uh, this camp. And I took a lot of pictures of the funeral. And the reason I was able to take pictures was that even though cameras were forbidden, the G2, a lieutenant colonel in our outfit, who was in charge of intelligence, was allowed to have army cameras. So I had a pistol, and usually I hate guns, cause I'm a medical man, [Ahem], and he saw the pistol and he wanted it, he was drooling for it. So, I said I'll give you the pistol if you'll give me a camera with plenty of film. So he said,

okay. So I took pictures of that, and of the funeral and, I have given those pictures to you and I hope you'll be able to use them.

SWB: How do you think the Germans who participated in that burial felt?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: You mean what was the...

SWB: The Germans from the town, yeah.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: What was their reaction to it? I-I d- I don't know exactly, it's awfully hard, I didn't ask any of them how they felt about this. I should have, I wish I had now. But I did take pictures of them and I have some close, distant pi- and uh, close-ups of women's, one woman's face and you can see in her face a look of sorrow, guilt, shame, it was all, I read her face that way and that was a close-up

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picture of her. The films were of good quality, by the way. Photography was good, the G.I. camera took good pictures.

SWB: Were you there when the inmates moved into those homes of the townspeople.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh yes, [Ahem] and [Ahem] we didn't have enough beds although we stole beds from the other apartments, and let the people sleep on the floor, we hated them they were Germans. And then, so we had to use straw, and I have a few pictures of patients sleeping on straw, l-l-lying on straw on the floor of this apartment house, which was now our hospital. And uh [Ahem] saw one of the men smoking a cigarette lying on the straw in the apartment house, so we had to prevent them from smoking, and uh, we lost 25 percent of them died in spite of our treatment, they were so far gone. I imagine that uh, we probably saved about 25, 75 and lost about 25. It was a relatively small camp, but a horrible thing oh God. I'll never forget it.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Can you describe coming up to the camp, as if you hadn't told me before.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Uh-huh, okay. Are you ready? Well [Ahem] our troops overran this camp and the word was sent back to our headquarters that the camp was there, and my colonel, and I was a major at that time, and my colonel uh

told me to come up and look the camp over and make a report on it, and make recommendations. So I had a jeep and a

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driver with a jeep and uh so we approached the camp in the jeep and the camp was uh had uh barracks buildings that looked like an ordinary army camp. Two or three barracks buildings, open ground, and [Ahem] and one of the buildings, there was an opening and uh, it looked as though it was a place where they kept cord wood, but there wasn't any cord wood there, there's just bo- bodies piled up like cord wood. That's one of the first things that I noticed. The other thing I noticed was people lying on the parade ground, two weak to get up, just barely breathing, there must have been a dozen of those. And uh, [Ahem] then I was im- wanted to see what was in the barracks. So I went into the barracks [coughs] and found that the beds were adjacent to each other and uh, there was barbed wire, the wire in- in the whole, the whole-, I mean how they could sleep on a bed of barbed wire, I couldn't get any answer to that, maybe they didn't sleep there. But uh on, however, I saw in the barracks, on several occasions, several beds, bodies in which, in which



there had been, had the chest and abdomen cut open, and since these people under starvation had lost their teeth and had swollen legs, and of course were very very underweight, skin and bones, starvation, they uh, there was cannibalism, and since they lost their teeth, they could only eat the liver without teeth, and it was apparent from several bodies that the liver had been eaten.

SWB: Was there a smell? A lot of people talk about smelling the camps before they got to the camps.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: There was, strangely enough, I have, in other places in the war I had been in confined areas where there were bodies and there was a sweet smell of death, but there wasn't that, at all in this camp.

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SWB: How big was this camp, how many people were there.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: I- I would, I didn't count them but I would estimate that uh the camp didn't hold over a hundred,

a hundred and fifty people.

SWB: When you were in the town, did you and your friends find a bust of Hitler, can you tell me about that?

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh that was another experience outside of the camp. [laughs] A brass bust of, just a head of Hitler, it was a hollow head, so we used that for a football, I kicked it up and down the street, in a town in Germany and [laughs] hoping that the people would notice it [laughs].

SWB: Tell me that story again, where did you find that thing.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: I forget what the town was. I- [Ahem] see in this concentration camp thing, this was only one of my jobs, I had other, I was only there for about a day and a half, and uh then the [Ahem] then the army took over, I mean we turned it over to the Army and [Ahem] I had to go to all the, many different hospitals, and all the hospitals that were overrun I went into to find out if there were any American or British troops, and I told them, they told me to ignore the French troops, but uh, Americans or British. And I captured the German general who was in one of the hospitals, took him to Army headquarters. That's a t- Oh and then there was another building where, where there were 1500 cases of Typhus fever, not typhoid but typhus, where they had a temperature of 105 for several weeks. And the

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Germans were shelling that building and the jeep driver and I had the building between us and leaving that the building between us and the Germans were shelling it. But the shells went over the building and landed in people's yards, uh, r-oh just-just a few hundred feet from where we were. So we waited until this, waited for the shelling to stop and it didn't seem to stop so I told the driver, I said let's go and see it, just take a chance, so we did and nothing happened. But [Ahem] that's, I had uh work to do in Italy and...

SWB: Back at the...

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: There was a lot of malaria in Italy

SWB: Did any of the people react to you at the camp, did any of them speak English, did you talk to any...

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Didn't talk to anybody except later on when we moved I talked to that uh Lunden Pole that I told you about, uh...

SWB: Let's get room tone of this...

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: ...Cause after, I mean fifty years later, you don't think of those things. What you think about is the horror, the horrible things

SWB: Right, let's talk about that when we, let's roll again and talk about that.

[SYNC MARK 3]

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SWB: So tell me what you think about 50 years later.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Well I've already mentioned the uh, is this a repeat?

SWB: Just tell me what you were just telling me then.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh. The actual trip to the camps, the

roads we took and that sort of thing, that's, that's forgotten. The thing that I remember are the horrors of the camp, the horrible things that I saw, the terrible terrible way that people were treated. Uh [Ahem] the starvation, the uh, these people had swollen legs, they were toothless, they were gaunt, just skin and bones, some of them couldn't even get, some of them were lying on the ground in the last throes of, just ready to die. And there was [Ahem] a uh place where they used to have wood I suppose, piled up wood and here the bodies were piled up like cord wood. And um, I do remember some of the people who were apparently were recent arrivals, women, particularly and one or two men, who were well-nourished and happy, and I think they were happy because they saw somebody in an American uniform which told them that they were free. The-these things I can remember I- I can remember all the pictures that I took, you know it, an- and I have loaned you uh quite a few pictures, that uh [Ahem] show you what was at the camp. Better than my, pictures will tell more than a thousand words, and these pictures do tell you an awful lot. For instance there, at the funeral, later on, funeral at Ludwigslust [Ahem] that the 82nd airborne conducted. I took photographs of that, and uh I took photographs of the people's faces to see if I could tell from their faces what their emotions were when they saw these things. And I imagined, at any rate, I

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interpreted these, one woman's face being, showing unbelief, sorrow, guilt, shame, she was not very happy. ... And uh, so hard to understand how these things can happen. I don't think they can happen in the United States. Do you have any more questions.

SWB: Yeah, tell me about the bust of Hitler.

ALFRED SUNDQUIST: Oh. [laughs] Somewhere in Germany, it had nothing to do with this camp that I was describing [Ahem] we got a hold of a hollow bronze head of Adolf Hitler, a darn good likeness too. And um mm we were walking the streets of this town and we were kicking it and using it as a football, and the people were watching us and uh of course they couldn't do anything about it [laughs] but, Hitler was a manic-depressive, and Napoleon was a manic-depressive and his periods of depression, in Napoleon's time, battles were lost, in the battle of Waterloo, he was in a period of depression. His faculty wasn't vital you know, as they are with many do, when he's in a state of mania. And Hitler, he had periods of depression too, and his judgement was very faulty, but they, generals didn't dare to oppose him. But when he was in a period of depression, he uh just said, fight to the last man, or something like that, you know, and

in Russia, an awful lot of Germans died- soldiers died because, the Russian winter, because Hitler was in a period of depression at that time. And [Ahem] we have, I think Abraham Lincoln was a manic-depressive and Churchill too. Church-English Churchill was manic-depressive. Uh, Martin Luther I believe was too, the one that founded Lutheranism. So that has a tangential relationship to this camp, beware of manic depressives [laughs]

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SWB: Now we need to record room tone again

[END]

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