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Nick White Interview 2/10/95

SWB: Tell me what happened when you came into Dachau.

NICK WHITE: I recall it was on April the 29th, 1945. When units of the sixth corps, the third, the 45th, and the 36th division, part of the seventh army, c- c- captured, or over-over- overrun the Dachau camp where they had taken so many of the Jewish people. But anyway the first thing as we come into the camp, uh, a man by the name of Engelhart from Detroit, Michigan was, was the with me, and uh the reason that we were able to get some pictures because he was a professional photographer and so anytime he could catch, he was able to find German film or German cameras, that was an excellent opportunity to get pictures. But anyway we went into this camp, I said, as I said before, shortly after, after daylight. And the first thing that we encountered was, there was a, there was a moat that was surrounding part of the camp anyway, and we were surprised at the number of dead SS soldiers that were uh, we were seeing as we come into the camp, and the reason why there were so many of them, some of them were floating in the moat and some of them were laying alongside in the streets and the reason why there were so many of them was because these were not the ordinary German soldiers. These men were trained SS troopers who had been indoctrinated down through the years

that the Jewish race was an offense to them and for they had one thought in mind, that was the el-, annihilation of the Jewish race. So as I said, these were liber- um group of men so, in other words, an ordinary German soldier, when they would be surrounded, would immediately surrender. But these men fought hard because they didn't want these, this terrible uh truth to get, be revealed of what had taken or

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was taking place at this concentration camp. So the net result, there was no prisoners taken and so they were strewn pretty much all over the camp. But I, one thing I do remember, uh, al- one of the streets, just adjacent to this moat, there was a um, the body of a German soldier, and standing beside him was a police dog. And that dog didn't pay any attention whatever to us. He just stared straight ahead, he act like he didn't even see us, and yet here again was, this dog had been trained to look upon those people as a threat to him, and so, whenever his master was, his life was taken, he come up with no reason for being there. And so he just set like a statue, and I thought, what a shame that this dog had given up his whatever he had, his

personality, was missing, as a normal, my son has a dog out on the farm, and when I go to visit him...

SWB: Let's stop for a minute...

[CUT]

SWB: Why don't we back up and start with you just walking into the camp and try to just take yourself back in time, and tell me what it was like.

NICK WHITE: Well I, as I look on it now, but it's of course fifty years ago, but um, as I, as I said about what I seen on this dog was a parallel to what the German officers, the relationship they had with the Jewish people was that there was a threat and they should be removed, and so this dog had been taught that very thing, and when his trainer or owner was no longer able to give him instructions, he became as of no use to himself, and so I thought this was a dark dark day in history, even for a German police dog. But from there we

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go into the barracks. They were long, um, almost like a poultry building that we might see down in Missouri, uh, perhaps a hundred feet long and maybe twenty-five feet wide. But as we went into this first barracks, we were overrun almost by about 25 or 30 of these inmates, who came and hugged us and tried to show us the gratitude they had for us being there liberating them. Actually we did not liberate them, it was the infantry units themselves that liberated these people but anyway, they were so overwhelmed with emotion that they tried every way they could to show us appreciation but I remember this young man, his name was, we called him Bud, he and I both had some caramels and I had some K ration biscuits, and we started to distribute them among these soldiers. Or rather, these camp inmates. And um, the net result was all, we almost started a riot, because they fought like animals, trying to re- to ris- to get anything that looked like food. And I, this man and I have discussed that since then and we have never encountered such a atmosphere of complete um desolation of the, of mankind. And then I recall that in these, in this um building itself, it was made like shelves that went clear to the ceiling and they would be just maybe two feet wide and two feet square, and these went the full length of the building, and these people would climb up and slide into these slots, I guess, I guess you could call them, and not a blanket, not any kind of bed clothes at all. Nothing but pure wood. And there they slept at night, and no, no ventilation, and no sanitary, um, equipment that they would

need. But that, uh, what bothered me the most, was out of these 25 or 30, there was 6 or 8 that just stared at the walls. I mean, there was not one bit of a feeling of or any kind of a expression of um who they were or what they were doing there. They just stared at the walls and I've often

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wondered, I wonder how many of these ever will be able to recover from that traumatic experience that they had been through. And so, that left me sad to say the least. I hope many of them recovered from that, but I have talked to doctors, they said, with the amount of trauma then been experienced, they may have never recovered. But we spoke to one of them who could speak English, and we asked him where are you going, and he said I'm going home. And so from there we went into the gas chamber and as we looked around the corridor of it, there was a, uh, nozzles of gas and the thing that, that um, I-I wanted to share with you that these people that were in the barracks were required to work as long as they could possibly work. When they were no longer able to work, they went out into the mines, into the fields, and harvest the grain and repaired railroads and repaired

highways, whatever damage the American bombers were causing from day to day. That's where these people were out working. Yet they were so thin, I don't see how they could possibly work, but they were. When they could no longer work, then they were taken into the gas chamber, and they were told, remove their clothing, that they were going to get a shower. And instead of a shower, they were gassed by the hundreds. From the gas chamber, which was adjacent to the uh, mor- uh, crema- crematorium itself, was, we opened into a large corridor, a room, and there was...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Okay, let's just back up to where you went in and saw the crematoria and the gas chambers, and just walk your way in and tell me what you saw.

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NICK WHITE: As we looked into the gas chamber, we had been

told that there weren't any [clears throat] there weren't such as thing as nozzles, and yet it was not a water or a spray nozzle, but it was a nozzle made especially for gas to put these, to exterminate these people in a, quickly as possible. And so the net result was that they were um as-as-as soon as they were gassed then they were taken into this large room where they were piled high, and uh, it looked like they had just been taken and just grabbed by the legs and throw up in a, a large pile, and I- and I-I would estimate there were probably several thousand bodies in this area. And there was eight furnaces that were going full blast and these, for instance, were tended by um, several of the inmates who were garbed in the prison clothing, so we knew they also were inmates, and um I often wondered what a traumatic experience for these people to burn some of their own people, day by day, and is it any wonder that some of them had lost their whole sense of being, their personality seemed to have disappeared from them.

SWB: What else did you see in that room with the bodies, describe the pile of bodies to me again.

NICK WHITE: The pile of bodies, you have to, you'd had to been there or seen a picture to ex- appreciate how much these poor people had suffered before they were gassed even. It- it's just, it's untold the suffering that they must have had to endure even before that, uh, it's- it's just beyond any imagination what they had suffered, and so, I, as we went into this large area where this, these bodies were

piled high, there was a sense of complete, uh, death, it seemed like its very atmosphere was death, and um, I've

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never forgotten that and the odor was unbelievable, it was almost more than you could endure to be there, and yet these, these men that were tending these furnaces had to be there day and night. And uh, when we come into the camp, they were dyings, 500 a day, in the barrackses, in the barracks, themselves. And there were 33,000 people here. But as we [clears throat] when we left the crematorium then, and went outside, not very far away from this building, was a large, or a high fence, enclosed wire, with had been uh charged with electricity, but the, the gate had been opened, so, as we went out, we opened up this gate again, and there we found 39 open box cars, and so we climbed up to see what was there, and there we beheld, dozens, I mean dozens of dozens of people who had been brought in from who knows where, all over Europe maybe, and there they were allowed to be on that uh siding for perhaps several days. Some of them had froze to death, some of them had died from ex- um , starvation, and some had been uh gunned down by the, by the

German guards when the Americans were approaching. And this is something I will never forget as long as I live, to see this, the very um, the very purpose of this whole, uh, camp was the destruction of the Israel people.

SWB: Can you tell me about any interaction with individual prisoners that you might have had, did they smile?

NICK WHITE: There was absolutely a smile on no one. It was nothing but death, even in those who were, who were uh able to speak with us. Their, their eyes were, had sunk clear back into their heads, and you, as-as-as I said, you had to be there to really understand how much these people had suffered. And I recall as we were there by that row of railroad cars, several of these had, that had been released,

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there was a garbage dump there, and I saw them pick up that garbage by the handfuls and eat it. I mean that was, they were starved to that point, where they would eat anything.

SWB: Tell me about the pile of bodies and the one that was

out of place.

NICK WHITE: The, the picture that I have shows this, on one of the piles, probably maybe a thousand bodies in this particular pile, but the thing that was the most uh hard to understand, these people were able to get hold, ahold of the camp commander, and beat him to death, and then they tossed him up on the top of these poor people who had been gassed there shortly before that.

SWB: Tell me what you knew when you arrived there. Had you been, did you know what to expect, tell me about your very first sensation.

NICK WHITE: We had never been given any idea what it might be like. But only that the name Dachau, smelt, s-s- told us that it was something out of the ordinary, and that's the reason why we took advantage to go and visit that so early, so soon after it had been taken by the units of the seventh army.

SWB: So now describe to me again walking in and try to take yourself back to exactly how you felt. Did you hesitate, did you stop, were you...

NICK WHITE: It is so long ago, that I'm telling you this, I- I have, no longer have the trauma that I had at that time, but I will say this, it is beyond my comprehension how

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man can be so inhuman to his own kind. Things that we don't even see in the world of nature.

SWB: Tell me again the story of giving caramels.

NICK WHITE: When we, uh, after these men had given us such a tremendous uh welcome, into their midst we decided that perhaps we had these caramels and these um K-ration biscuits, maybe we could share some of them with them. And uh as we tried to uh pass them out to each one individual, all of a sudden we just, we could see we were causing nearly a riot, which we might uh, put ourself in jeopardy to be a part of. And so we um hastened to um to remove ourself from the area.

SWB: Did the inmates make any sounds? Did they call out to you, do you remember?

NICK WHITE: No, I don't recall, only this one man, we asked him, cause we were, we were concerned about, what are these people going to do. They're starving now, and um what are

they going to, and no doubt many of them were hundreds of miles from their homeland, and yet this man said, I'm going home when we asked him where are you going, he said I'm going home, and yet, and, and then, as we went out of the camp, the roads were just packed with people, um, trying to get away from the camp as fast as they possibly could, to go anywhere but to be out of Dachau.

SWB: Okay, thank you.

[CUT]

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SWB: Nick, can you tell me again what happened as you saw everyone leaving Dachau, just tell me what was going on. What were the people doing, leaving going out the gates? Describe that to me.

NICK WHITE: Well, as I remember, they was, there was thousands of them just aimlessly walking around the camp. They didn't seem to have anything in mind where they were

going. Some of them were out on the highways, some of them were just standing out on the highways, some of them were movng south towards Munich. But most of them were aimlessly walking around the camp, uh, most of them, uh, had no where, no way to get to where they would like to go without walking, and most of them were unable to walk, because of their physical condition. Even those that we saw in the barracks, they were so thin, you could reach around their waist with two hands, I mean that's how thin they were and it was amazing to me that they could still walk. That was the amazing thing, that these had, those people had the ability to get up and walk, after suffering so much.

SWB: This picture, describe to me this picture, can you see it from there. Describe it as if I can't see this picture.

NICK WHITE: As we come into the um crematorium uh itself, uh when we saw that, this tremendous body of people who had been, had endured so much and we could even see like they were still suffering on their faces, it seemed to carry on after they died, the horror that they had, uh, experienced. It was still on their faces, just as I talked about that police dog, all of a sudden he had no reason to be there.

SWB: Tell me about how the inmates were still burning the

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bodies but explain to me who was making them burn the bodies.

NICK WHITE: I, as I, we know that the German SS troops were all dead, so I don't know what may- motivated th- I think it was just because th-they didn't have any other reason to do it, but to go ahead and do something that was to be done. I don't think they even thought about it anymore, it just become mechanical to them, well they couldn't have kept doing it. Uh, that's the way it looked to me. Uh, then, I don't know why, what would motivate them, no one was standing over them with a gun anymore, but they were still pu- they would ta- they had ropes and they would drag them over to the furnaces. And it appeared there was a grate underneath where the ashes fell through and then they would pull this grate this back out and then pile the two more bodies on them. In one of the camps uh adjacent to this, which is in Poland, they were burning 4000 bodies a day. Well I have no idea how many they were burning here but we know there was at least 500 dying a day plus what they were destroying in the gas chamber.

SWB: Tell me again about the pile of bodies and tell me that the, tell me the difference between the bodies and the

commandant who was on top of the bodies.

NICK WHITE: Uh, when we, when we saw that, and I guess I can use the term fat man, cause that's what he was, and when you, when you compared body with those poor people who were nothing but skin and bones, you thought, boy what, what a price that man paid for being a part of that.

SWB: Describe to me the inmates and what they were wearing,

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and how they looked to you.

NICK WHITE: Well they, they had the prison garb that they wore were all the same, it was striped, striped uh, uh looked like it was, it was, they were so dirty you couldn't hardly see the color of them but, but they were supposed to have been white at one time. And uh the men, and I might add, there were no women in, and no children in this, in Dachau, they were all men, and most of them middle aged, even to maybe in the twenties, but none that were very old, but I would believe they were in no more than 40 at the

most, and yet they were unshaven and uh, uh p-p- the, you can't describe how thin they were without seeing them. Uh, I guess there's no other way to describe it. You'd had to seen it to understand what they had endured.

SWB: In your military career had you seen death before.

NICK WHITE: Yes, but it seemed like before this there had been some, maybe a purpose to be gained by giving a life, we as Americans felt we were fulfilling a tremendous responsibility, and the American soldier laid his life on the line. But when you go into a camp, there's absolutely no purpose for that, that is of any value to mankind. But for the destruction of a race.

SWB: Okay let's cut.

[CUT]

NICK WHITE: Um yes I recall that very well, because the first uh, when we first come in there and they just engulfed us just about, and there was just the two of us, and there

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was perhaps 30 of them but, uh, when we started to pass out these caramels and those biscuits, you know, they were hard, the American soldier, he ate them begrudgingly, but these men grabbed each other by the throat like animals and fought, and I, as he, I visit with this young man two years ago at a reunion in Mansfield, Ohio, I said Bud, do you remember that, um, riot we almost started in luka- dukow, and he said I will never forget that as long as I live. He said I think you and I had started something that we weren't able to stop.

[VOICE]: What about that dog you saw?

NICK WHITE: That-that. The fact that that dog would not look at anyone. That was unreal. To see a dog that wouldn't even look at you-at you as you walked by him. But this dog, we would walk with- in fact, we sat down within ten feet of that dog and ate some K rations that we had left and he never indicated any uh, gave us any indication at all that he even seen us. But he stared just like a statue. And I think he had lost a pa- his personality too because all of a sudden he found no reason for being there. Before, he had a reason because he had been indoctrinated but these people are a threat to us. And we have to, we have to be, we have to overcome them at any cost. But all of a sudden he had no reason for being there.

[END]

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