HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

WILBUR JURIST

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: January 14, 1988

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WJ - Wilbur Jurist [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: January 14, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Wilbur Jurist. The date is January 14th, 1988. Mr. Jurist, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

WJ: Yes, I was serving with the 82nd Airborne Division in their Engineer Battalion, and this took place in the town of Ludwigslust, which is in the northern part of Germany. [tape off then on]

PS: Did you know of the existence of this particular camp that you would liberate before you arrived there?

WJ: No.

PS: You did now know...

WJ: No, I did not.

PS: You didn't know of its existence at all. Do you remember the approximate date that you arrived at this site?

WJ: Well, it was cause it was in, it--near the end of the war we took the surrender of a whole army group who were running away from the Russians and surrendered to us. So this would have been in April, I would think, or May.

PS: Most of the liberations, I think were the middle of April to the end of April. [tape off then on] the German surrender being, I believe, the 9th of May. Mr. Jurist, before you arrived at the camp, had you heard anything, or had you heard very much at all, about the mass murder of political prisoners and Jews in Europe?

WJ: No, I had not heard.

PS: Nothing, not at all.

WJ: Well, I must have heard something, but I...

PS: Yeah, but, you knew nothing of the mass murder.

WJ: No, that's right.

PS: You knew, did you know, well then obviously, you knew nothing or had heard nothing of gas chambers...

WJ: No.

PS: Concentration camps, ovens? You had heard nothing at all of...

WJ: No. We had liberated a few prisoners, American prisoners, before this, who were treated relatively well by the German people. They were not kept all the time in prison camps even. They were under guard out in the fields working in the fields, on farms, and we actually liberated some men that were captured from us in Italy.

PS: From your own outfit?

WJ: From our own outfit, yeah.

PS: But from what you saw of the German troop, treatment of prisoners of war, the PWs...

WJ: Yeah.

PS: Prisoners of war, that gave you no indication of the horrors that you would see later in connection with their treatment of the inmates of concentration camps, is that true?

WJ: That's right. That's true.

PS: Can you please give the name of the camp you liberated and its location?

WJ: I'm sorry, I do not remember the name of the camp.

PS: The date, the, you can't remember the name, but can you kind of pinpoint maybe the location? A town that it was close to?

WJ: Well, this town of Ludwigslust was the cap, the county seat like, the state capitol or whatever where...

PS: That is Ludwig-, L-U-D-...

WJ: L-U-D-W-I-...

PS: W-I-G-...

WJ: G-S-L-U-S-T.

PS: Yes.

WJ: Ludwigslust. I'm not sure of that spelling, but it's approximately that.

PS: At that time you were approaching the meeting between your troops and the Russian troops, do I...

WJ: That's correct.

PS: So that this, the location of this camp must have been pretty close to the farthest line of advance of American and British troops.

WJ: Oh this was as far as we went.

PS: Yeah.

WJ: But the war ended while we were, like, you know, I mean...

PS: Did you...

WJ: At least in the act of fighting.

PS: Well in that vicinity did you make contact with Russian troops?

WJ: Yes, we, they didn't get as far as this camp. We contacted them a little bit to the east of where this camp was.

PS: Now to the best of your memory, Mr. Jurist, can you describe what you saw at the camp, and what you felt at the time?

WJ: Yes, I don't think I'll ever forget it, actually. There were, it was not, I don't think, a major camp for size. There were maybe three or four barracks buildings like. And when we entered this barracks building, there were bodies on two levels of bunks. They were double bunks like. And some of these people were dead, and some of them were not dead, in these buildings. The smell was horrible. The people were so emaciated that

although some, they were laying in some cases on their backs, you could see their backbone through their stomach. There was also, besides the bodies in the barracks, there was a big trench where bodies had been thrown in, no attempt to even cover them. These soldiers, these people were for the most part prisoners from the Polish Army, from way back at the beginning of the war. They had been in Germany hands, that long, and had been just slowly starved to death, and worked at the same time. Some of them died after we liberated them, they were so far gone. We, we weren't very well-equipped, you know, an Airborne Division does not have a great amount of logistics and things like that. And we tried feeding them, oh, you couldn't feed them C rations or K rations. That was too hard for them. But we could, we got, had some soup and, you know, bouillon, like you would use, that we tried to give them. But some of them couldn't take food or...

PS: Yeah, we had heard that even, the low [unclear] content of fat of soups...

WJ: Yeah, it was bad...

PS: Was more than they could digest.

WJ: Right.

PS: And they died almost instantly just from that.

WJ: Now, they weren't, all of them were, you'd say, "Boy is he skinny," you know or something. That was the best of them you'd think were as thin as a rail. A lot of, when we liberated them, they wanted to get out of the camp right away, the ones that were, you know, had some strength left. And they were raising hell in the town that we had just come through, this Ludwigslust. They, they captured a German tank and were trying to run, ram people up against walls and everything else. When they...

PS: When they, oh, pardon me for...

WJ: Yeah, go ahead.

PS: When they were kind of on a rampage through this town...

WJ: Yeah?

PS: What was the reaction? Was there any reaction at all from German civilians that were within the town?

WJ: Well, you know I told you that General Gavin [phonetic] was in command of the 82nd Airborne Division. And he did a novel thing. As I say, this city or town was a county seat, and they had a city hall that he was using as his headquarters. And there was a park all out in front of this city hall. And he had all the bodies taken from the camp, from the concentration camp, by the German citizens. They had to dig them up in cases where they were covered, and bring them into the town, and they dug graves all in this park. And...

PS: That park was in the center of...

WJ: Of Ludwigslust.

PS: Ludwigslust.

WJ: Yeah. And then when they had them all moved in, he got the whole population of the town and paraded them through, past these open graves with these bodies in them.

PS: So none of them could ever...

WJ: And...

PS: Say that they didn't...

WJ: Yeah, and they...

PS: See anything.

WJ: They used to say [unclear] this camp was on a major highway, not an *Autobahn* or anything like that, but a major highway, between Ludwigslust, and I can't remember the other city, but it may have been Aachen, I'm not sure. And the camp was on one side of the road, and just off the road, you couldn't go by that camp and not see it was there. But nobody claimed they knew anything about it.

PS: Yes. None of them knew about. Mr. Jurist, can you again spell for us Ludwigslust? That's L-U-...

WJ: D-...

PS: D-W-...

WJ: W-I-G-...

PS: I-G-S-...

WJ: L-...

PS: L-...

WJ: U-S-T.

PS: U-S-T.

WJ: I, that would be phonetically how I'd spell it anyhow. That's how it was pronounced when we were...

PS: And you think that also was close to the German city of...

WJ: Aachen I think.

PS: Aachen.

WJ: I think.

PS: A-U-C-H-E-N. [Aachen]

WJ: A-A-C-H-E-N, I think.

PS: Yeah. Yeah, we'll check that.

WJ: I think so.

PS: Can you estimate, when you entered the prison, can you estimate approximately how many prisoners were there, if any of them were dead, if you were able to save any that were near death?

WJ: Yes. I would say we probably saved half of them that were there, just as a rough estimate. At least they were still alive when we had turned them over to rear echelon medical authorities, you know? But I would say there were maybe 200 to a barrack, something like that, and I think there were three barracks.

PS: So, you would estimate that there were approximately 600 prisoners there when you arrived. Now, were they, were all of the, you say some were alive and some were dead.

WJ: Some were dead. Some, you had a little trouble determining which were which.

PS: Yeah. Some of the alive...

WJ: Some were so bad...

PS: Some of those living...

WJ: You couldn't tell...

PS: Looked worse than the...

WJ: Whether they were...

PS: Yeah, we found many where some of those living looked worse than the dead.

WJ: Yeah.

PS: And you say that you were able to save some that were near death. And some you lost.

WJ: As I said, yeah. Some of them were, well compared to the norm for them, were in pretty good shape and I think were not in this camp from the beginning. Besides the Polish prisoners of war that were in this camp, there were also political prisoners from Germany itself.

PS: So as far as nationality groups, you think it was mostly Polish...

WJ: There were no...

PS: And...

WJ: There were no German, no French or English or American prisoners in this camp at all. And there were either, the rest of them were either German or Polish.

PS: German or Polish.

WJ: And now that...

PS: Germans being mostly political prisoners.

WJ: Yeah, that's what...

PS: And...

WJ: They...

PS: To your knowledge, you, were there any Jews? Jews in this camp?

WJ: Well, I think some of the Polish were Jewish, and, I don't really know. You know.

PS: To your knowledge there were no Jews as such.

WJ: I mean, the condition...

PS: And...

WJ: The condition of the prisoners, of most of them, were so that they had no, well, racial characteristics or anything.

PS: Yeah.

WJ: You know?

PS: They all looked the same.

WJ: They all looked...

PS: Were there any children in the camp?

WJ: No.

PS: So there were...

WJ: There were no women and no children.

PS: No women and no children.

WJ: They were all men.

PS: Now, once in the camp, had you been assigned any responsibilities in arranging for the transfer or care of prisoners...

WJ: No, this was not my responsibility.

PS: Please describe the reactions of the prisoners as you entered the camp.

WJ: Well, they were lethargic for the most part. I mean they were so far gone, most of them, that I don't know that they even realized they'd been liberated.

PS: Were there any Germans or German guards still left in the camp when you arrived?

WJ: Cars?

PS: Guards. Guards.

WJ: Yes. There were one or two, I think, that were, I think they were questioning them. See, I was not one of the very first people in the camp, but the condition was the same as it, as when it was first...

PS: Would you be in a position to describe the behavior of the German, the few German guards who still were within the camp?

WJ: They were pretty snotty, to tell you the truth. They weren't, they didn't seem horribly frightened of what was gonna happen to them. They acted very nonchalant sort of.

PS: Did you, did your unit come prepared with food and medical supplies?

WJ: It was a complete surprise to us as far as I know.

PS: So you had nothing really to offer in the way of medical aid or...

WJ: See...

PS: Food or...

WJ: We wouldn't have even had any, an advance unit out in front of us, because we had already stopped fighting per se. For the last, for the two days while we were approaching this town of Ludwigslust, the last two days, there were German troops going by us. It was a very weird situation. You'd see a whole row of tanks, German tanks coming along and they'd wave to us and go on, right on by!

PS: They were coming in for...

WJ: They were surrendering.

PS: Surrendering.

WJ: Yeah. Well as I, you can imagine, we only had a Divisional front, a short Divisional front, because Airborne usually they're assigned short. They don't have many troops compared to a regular Div-, infantry Division. And in the area that we were, a whole army group surrendered to us. Now that's maybe ten divisions or something like that.

PS: Did the experience of seeing the prisoners within this concentration camp have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

WJ: Well maybe we, it certainly gave us a feeling of horror, that people could act this way.

PS: Do you recall the reactions of the other men in your unit? Did you talk with them after, afterwards about the experience?

WJ: Oh, everybody was pretty well concerned about it. We, as I say, it was more of a surprise to us than, you know, you heard some stories about the camps where the ovens were--not much, but a little bit. And I get mixed up in the timing as to, you know, when I heard what, when I heard...

PS: When you saw and became aware of the horrors that had taken place in this camp, did you then realize that there were, did you think possibly this was the only one or did you think at that time that if there was one there must have been...

WJ: Oh I thought there was more.

PS: Plenty more.

WJ: See, we had had some problems with some German troops in the Bulge and in that area. Like, we were involved in the Malmédy massacre. That was some of our men that were killed in the...

PS: That was an infantry regiment that went in to a, were captured and slaughtered by the Germans?

WJ: Yeah, slaughtered, yeah.

PS: How long did you remain in the camp? And did your experience linger after you left?

WJ: Yeah, I was in the camp on the first occasion for, oh, maybe six or seven hours, something like that. And then I came back again before we were pulled out of that area. By that time all the people had been removed.

PS: In your own mind, can you explain or even attempt to explain the German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

WJ: [pause] Well, of course the big ones, Belsen and those I think, they used the Jews as a scapegoat for all of their problems and everything else, and, and for this reason they [pause] and they also were, the great conceit of the German people, they were so sure that they were better than everybody else.

PS: Did this experience, Mr. Jurist, have any effect whatsoever on your faith in your religion? Faith in mankind? The slaughter that you saw...

WJ: Yeah, I know what you...

PS: The inhumanities.

WJ: I don't think I generalized from the camps.

PS: After you left the camp, was there any official or unofficial meeting of your unit to discuss what you had experienced at the camp?

WJ: No, I don't think so. But, a whole lot of us, we sent representatives from each unit of the Division to this ceremony that they had when they planted the [unclear]...

PS: Something like a dedication of, a memorial service.

WJ: That's right.

PS: Do you know if there was any regimental history of your unit that included this experience?

WJ: Yes, as I say, I think there is. It's a book, big book about this thick and like this.

PS: That book was what, the regimental history of the 82nd Airborne Division?

WJ: The 82nd, right.

PS: Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of camps?

WJ: No, I don't think so.

PS: You, I believe a question you answered previously partially answers this, but did you have any idea of the number of camps, or the number of prisoners in captivity?

WJ: No.

PS: Not until you heard, more or less in history?

WJ: No, after, yeah.

PS: Did any of the prisoners you liberated ever contact you or your unit, do you know?

WJ: Not that I know.

PS: Do you think that you would have had the same feelings toward the war if you had not been an eyewitness to the Nazi atro--to the Nazi atrocities of the war, of the Holocaust?

WJ: Well, it certainly strengthened my feelings that what I was doing was something that needed to be done.

PS: How long did you remain in Europe after the war?

WJ: In Europe. We came out, see, we were taken back to France and we were supposed to be getting ready to go to Japan [chuckles]. You know, the regular army Generals, they can't wait to get back in the war, you know. [laughs] That's when they get promoted is when they have a war on, and they were ready, all ready to get us into Japan. And we were getting ready to sail from Marseilles. And we eventually sailed from Marseilles for home instead of to Japan.

PS: Would you like, Mr. Jurist, to add anything at all to your testimony? Any questions we didn't cover or any answers that you...

WJ: Well, this is...

PS: Think you...

WJ: Right after we pulled back a little ways from Ludwigslust, after a couple of days, and I had an odd assignment. I was given command of a German camp, a camp for German civilians, displaced people, really. I had 2,000 Germans with a staff of, I think I

had maybe 15 or 20 men, something like that. The Germans immediately organized the camp themselves. You know, there's something about the German nationality is that if you get a, if you're working prisoners, for example, and you have, oh, maybe 15 prisoners or something like that, without anybody appointing anybody or anything else, some, one of the Germans will take command [chuckles] of the prisoners, and give them all their marching instructions, you know and all that kind of stuff.

PS: Yes, it's follow the leader.

WJ: They really do.

PS: Yeah.

WJ: And, of course once we got into Germany, none of the Germans you met were Nazis. They were all, you know, they were, if they did it they did it because they were forced into it...

PS: Yeah.

WJ: Like that. I, one time went into a German farm to get some directions when we were, this was when we were linking up with the British before we crossed, I think it was the Elbe River, the last river that we crossed. And oh the, they couldn't be nicer to me, you know. But I noticed there was one little boy. He must have been about four or five. And he stood over in the corner of the room and he just glowered at me. And it was funny. We walked out of that, the farmhouse and as we started walking towards the road, and this little kid ran up behind us and picked up a stone and threw it [chuckling] at us. [unclear] He struck me much better than anybody else in the family because at least he had the courage of his convictions.

PS: We had some little kids that threw...

WJ: Stones at you?

PS: Yeah.

WJ: Right.

PS: Mr. Jurist, you served as an officer in the...

WJ: Yeah.

PS: 82nd Airborne Division.

WJ: Yeah.

PS: What was your rank, Sir?

WJ: First Lieutenant.

PS: Ah, Lieutenant Jurist, I thank you very much for your, your testimony I'm sure will be most valuable addition to our Oral History Archive. So thank you very much.

WJ: You're quite welcome.