

William Applegate: Oral History Transcript

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Name: William H. Applegate (1920–1985)

Birth Place: Camden, New Jersey

Arrived in Wisconsin: 1969, Madison

Project Name: Oral Histories: Wisconsin Survivors of the Holocaust



William H. Applegate

Biography: Col. William H. Applegate was an American witness to the Holocaust. He was a 25-year-old soldier who arrived at Dachau only hours after its liberation. William was born on February 25, 1920, in Camden, New Jersey. He joined the U.S. Army in 1940. During World War II he was a captain in the 44th Infantry Division. It landed in Cherbourg, France, in September 1944, and headed southeast toward Bavaria and the Austro-Italian border. At the war's end, his unit was only 140 kilometers from Dachau and he decided to go there.

Like most Americans, William did not realize the extent of Nazi brutality — until he saw it for himself. As witnesses to Dachau only 72 hours after it had been liberated, William and two other officers soon found that the truth exceeded even the worst rumors. He took 40 photographs of the concentration camp, but somehow they disappeared. He believed they were stolen by the Nazi-sympathizing mother of his live-in maid in Germany.



From December 1946 to November 1949, William served as a sub-post commander at Butzbach displaced persons camp. After a distinguished military career and attaining the rank of Colonel, William retired from active duty in 1968. He became the Assistant Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society in January 1969 and continued in that role until 1983. He died in 1985.

Audio Summary: Below are the highlights of each tape. It is not a complete list of all topics discussed.

Tape 1, Side 1

- Recollections of encountering labor camps
- Describing Dachau

Tape 1, Side 2

- Describing Dachau
- Impressions of German civilian attitudes toward the Holocaust following the war

Tape 2, Side 1

- Impressions of German civilian attitudes toward the Holocaust following the war
- Working with displaced persons at Butzbach

About the Interview Process:

A 90-minute interview was conducted by Jean Loeb Lettofsky on March 11, 1980, in William's office at the Wisconsin Historical Society. William was the only liberator interviewed for the Oral Histories: Wisconsin Survivors of the Holocaust project. He was prompted to be interviewed for this project by his staff. They thought he would offer valuable perspective to the testimonies of the survivors.

Audio and Transcript Details:

Interview Date

- Mar 11, 1980

Interview Location

- Applegate's office at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

Interviewer

- Archivist Jean Loeb Lettofsky

Original Sound Recording Format

- 2 qty. 60-minute audio cassette tapes

Length of Interview

- 1 interview, total approximately 1.5 hours

Transcript Length

- 30 pages

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Transcript

The following transcript is from the collections of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. It is an unedited, firsthand account of the Nazi persecution of the Jews before and during World War II. Portions of this interview may not be suitable for younger or more sensitive audiences. It is unlawful to republish this text without written permission from the Wisconsin Historical Society, except for nonprofit educational use.

Key

JL Jean Loeb Lettofsky, Wisconsin Historical Society archivist

WA William Applegate, Holocaust survivor

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

JL: Okay Bill just to get us biographical data, your date and place of birth, and names of parents and their dates and places of birth?

WA: I was born in Camden, New Jersey. My parents were Earl and Helena Applegate. I was born in 1920. I spent my early years there until I came into the army in 1941, 1940 actually. I still have relatives there, but I consider Wisconsin my home now.

JL: And do you recall when your parents were born?

WA: My mother was born in 1903 and my father was born in 1900. They're both natives of New Jersey.

JL: What was your mother's maiden name?

WA: O'Brien.

JL: Okay, now as we agreed I'd like to ask you a bit about your roll in the liberation of Dachau, but first a little bit of background. When did you enter the military?

WA: I went in the active army in September of 1940. After the war I became a professional soldier. I was integrated into the regular army and stayed in the army until 1968. So I had about thirty-two years service total, twenty-eight of which was active duty.

JL: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

WA: I enlisted in the New Jersey National Guard when I was in high school and our National Guard unit was inducted into federal service in 1940. Shortly after that, I was appointed an officer, and after the war

[began] I was integrated in the regular army. And it was in this that I was in the European theater in World War II and it was because of this that I had some contact with Dachau concentration camp.

JL: What was your military rank in 1945?

WA: In 1945 I was a captain of infantry in the Forty-fourth Infantry Division.

JL: What were your duties then as captain?

WA: As a captain of infantry I was a rifle company commander. That's the front line infantry unit. I was a rifle company commander for the entire time that I was over in the European theater and I came back as a rifle company commander.

JL: Do you remember your army serial number at that time?

WA: This is sort of difficult because I have three serial numbers. I had a serial number as an enlisted man, which is 20226784. Then when I became an officer, I was given another serial number, 0404404, which is very easy to remember. And then finally when I was integrated into the regular army I was given another number, 065007. And now I understand they use your social security number. I've been retired ten years, eleven years really. But now they use your social security number.

JL: When did you say you began your army career?

WA: I actually began my army career in active service in September of 1940. However I had been in the National Guard from September of 1936, so I had thirty-two years military service total, National Guard and active. Twenty-eight of it was as a commissioned officer, a little more than twenty-eight.

JL: Now what number of the army were you in when you came to the camp?

WA: I was in the seventh army, the 15th Corp. of the Seventh Army, the 44th Division of the 15th Corp. The 324th Infantry Regiment of the 44th Division.

JL: And battalion?

WA: Well, I was in the Second Battalion of the 324th Infantry.

JL: I know this is kind of short notice, but could you give me full names of your squad, platoon, and battalion regiment leaders?

WA: I can tell you whom starting with the Division. Forty-fourth Division was commanded by Major General William F. Dean of Korean fame. He was the officer who was captured in Korea and later was released and given the Congressional Medal [of Honor]. My immediate regimental commander was Colonel Kenneth S. Anderson. Both of these gentlemen are still alive. My battalion commander was now Major General Colin P. Williams from Syracuse, New York. He later became a major general in the National Guard. Of course, I was the company commander. As a company commander I had five platoons and twenty squads and I don't really remember all their names. I remember the officers who commanded those platoons. Lieutenant [Milton C.] Shattuck had the one platoon, Lieutenant Wood had another platoon, Lieutenant Bradshaw had another platoon, Lieutenant Call, I believe, had the other platoon at that time. Lieutenant Bresnahan relieved Call. So at the end of the war when I visited Dachau, those were the officers. Now my regiment has its reunion every year in September and I'm secretary of that regiment, but only about six or eight men from my company attend the reunion because there aren't that many left. They're dying off pretty quickly now. I happened to be the youngest officer in the division at one time and therefore, but many of them are going fast.

JL: When did you land in Europe?

WA: We came into Europe on the, about September 10th of 1944. We landed at Cherbourg, France.

JL: Now the commander you mentioned before, was that the same commander who commanded your regiment at that time?

WA: No, at that time General Dean was the assistant division commander and we had a commander by the name of Major General [Robert L.] Spragins who later became ill and had to leave the division. The regimental commander was at that time a Colonel Thatcher Nelson, who was killed a few days after we went into combat. He stepped on a mine and was killed. The battalion commander was the same from the time we landed until the time the war was over.

JL: Could you describe the direction your division took?

WA: We landed at Cherbourg. There was a breakout at Avranches about that time in France, and the armored division started racing across. We were put into the lines to relieve the Seventy-ninth Division and mid-October of '44 and from that point on went straight into lower Germany, down into the Redoubt area, to the Kern Pass and ended up on the Austrian-Italian border in Southern Germany, Austria, Austria-Italian Border.

JL: Were you involved in a great deal of warfare?

WA: We were in constant contact with the enemy for more than two hundred days without respite. The war ended in May, and we went in September, so see that's about nine months. And that was pretty intense till the latter days of the war.

JL: Would you say that the attitudes of the Jewish soldiers differed from the attitudes of the non-Jews?

WA: No. I had Jewish soldiers in my unit. I can think of one by the name of Berkowitz, he was a good soldier. I had another lad, his name escapes me now, but he was a Jewish boy and a good soldier. Those are two that I can think of offhand. My company was composed of a number of men who came in from New York City and there was a fairly large sprinkling of Jewish men. I have records of who was in my company at the time the war was over and those who joined. I didn't see any difference between Jewish soldiers and non-Jewish soldiers. One of my best friends was a Jewish captain in service company by the name of Bronstein, and he was a good soldier. I don't think there was any difference. When you're that age and you're that young, I don't think there's any difference.

JL: Did any Jewish soldiers express a feeling that they were fighting for the Jewish cause as well as the American cause?

WA: No, at that age no one is really tuned to politics much. In those days they weren't anyway. Today you might find that on a university campus or something, but in those days there just wasn't that same awareness of these various causes and there certainly wasn't that same prejudice that you have encountered in the last ten, fifteen, twenty years.

JL: So was there no talk of putting an end to Nazi brutality or anything of that sort?

WA: Oh, yeah, we all talked about... I don't think we realized the extent of the Nazi brutality. Again, we were pretty naive, as soldiers we were apolitic and pretty naive. We didn't realize the extent of it until we began to liberate the prisoner of war camps and we began to liberate the forced worker camps and things like that. And as we got further into Germany then we began to see what we had read rather skeptically in the newspapers. But I don't think that there was, I think our objective was to win over Nazi Germany and get Hitler out of there. We had no idea that he was roasting human beings and doing all the other things that we later found out about.

JL: You mentioned that you liberated forced labor camps and other camps besides Dachau, what were [those other camps]?

WA: I guess the first one I remember was shortly after we crossed the Rhine and were in the vicinity of Heidelberg, Mannheim, in that area. We began to see stragglers coming through with uniforms on that indicated they were in forced labor camps. They had a brown uniform on with a horizontal stripe. It was a brown, baggy pair of pants and a brown shirt.

JL: How did you know, did you at that time identify that they were...?

WA: We questioned them and they told us that they had been, some of them, when we were coming and the guards abandoned them, why they just got out and started foraging for food and things and started heading towards the sound of the guns. And we questioned them and found out, yes, they were. That's the first indication. However, later on as I went down into Bavaria and down into Austria, we began to run into these camps and they were usually adjacent to large manufacturing places. I remember one was in the town of Füssin, and there we liberated a camp that was behind barbed wire and lot of low barracks. There were men in one side and women in the other side and I remember when we liberated it we just opened the gates and turned them all out and provided them what food we could because I was just a rifle company commander. We carried our food on our back. Shortly after, a well-dressed lady drove up in a big black car in front of the headquarters that I was occupying temporarily, demanded to see me, and came in and said that she ruled this labor camp, it was her mill. Her main gripe was that we had allowed

the men and the women to get out together and that they were going to cause trouble. I questioned her and I told her that we had liberated them and that they were going to stay liberated and that's it. If they wanted to go back to where their bed was at night, that was their problem, but they weren't going to be behind barbed wire. She as much as threatened me saying that she was an American citizen from Pittsburgh and that she had been caught there after the war and that she had American citizen's rights and that I was to protect them. So I told her that I would protect her rights if she was in fact an American citizen, that I would escort her to the rear, which she didn't want, of course, but that I was not about to lock those people up again and that she would have to straighten out her American citizenship with the military government unit as it came through later. This was in the front line. And she was very insistent that I lock these people back up and my advice to her and to the *Burgermeister*¹ was that she better keep on feeding them at least for the next forty-eight hours until we could get food coming through from the military and civil government units that followed us. But that was one encounter and all of those people were dressed in the same kind of uniform, this brown-striped type of uniform. I think all of the forced labor camps had that same kind of uniform.

JL: Wait, before you go on, do you remember the name of the camp?

WA: I don't know that it had a camp. There was a manufactory. There in the town of Füssin there was a large factory and I don't even know what they made. My troops went in there and opened gates and we didn't disturb any of the factory except to see that it wasn't manufacturing munitions and then we reported if it were.

JL: People lived in there?

WA: They lived right in the compound adjacent to it.

JL: What condition were they in?

WA: I can't say they weren't mistreated. I can say the ones that I saw didn't look hungry. They didn't look emaciated or anything like that. They were factory workers and they didn't look fat, far from that, but they

¹ German for 'mayor'.

looked healthy enough. There weren't any signs of scabs or scurvy or anything like that on them. They looked healthy enough. They looked clean. Of course, that's what this woman's whole point was — she was a benevolent employer naturally.

JL: Were they Jews or non-Jews?

WA: I don't know, that I don't know. I only know that it was a forced labor camp. They could have been Polish, they could have been Jews. We came into this town, there was a threat of SS soldiers up in the hills that had abandoned the town. We set up a quick defense until we got our orders, and as soon as units came up to relieve us, we moved on. So I had my hands full just collecting the weapons and things in the town.

JL: You had no face-to-face clash with any of the SS?

WA: No, but we knew that they were in the hills just beyond. This town sits in a very deep valley, down in the Tirol.

JL: I'm curious about this woman. She was an American citizen?

WA: She claimed she was.

JL: Did you get any idea of why she was there?

WA: She claimed that she was visiting her relatives in Germany at the time the war broke out and was not permitted to go back to the United States. That this was her property, that her husband and someone, I can't recall now, it's so long ago. But I've always remembered her insistence that I had to protect her rights as an American, including her property, and she acted as though the people that were her workers were her property. Well, of course, they could have been her property, but they were locked up and we let them out.

JL: Now the date again at that camp, at that factory?

WA: That would have been in late March or early April. I could look it up. I have a division history and it may say when that happened, I don't know.

JL: You spoke English to this woman, I assume.

WA: She spoke very good English. I didn't speak German at that time. I speak German now, but I didn't then.

JL: You did talk before about not knowing too much and reading the newspapers and not believing what you had heard. What exactly was your knowledge about the way the Germans treated [their prisoners]?

WA: I think it varied with the different camps. Now, these people looked very healthy, but a few miles further on down, in the town of Göppingen, we ran into some that were emaciated and looked like they hadn't had anything to eat for a long time. This was another labor camp that was up on the hills overlooking Göppingen.

JL: Do you recall what the camp itself was called?

WA: I don't know what the camp was called. In that case I had been off on another mission and when I rejoined my column they had already been liberated by my regiment and elements of the Tenth Armored Division, I believe. But they were wandering around the town and foraging for food and things, I suppose, or just enjoying their freedom and waving and shouting, "Army! Army!" and all that sort of thing that we used to get all the time. But they looked pretty bad. They were gaunt. The males, all their heads were shaved. I later ran into a lady who was a doctor who had been at that camp and I know her still. She's a chief surgical assistant at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Philadelphia, or Hahnemann [University Hospital], I'm not sure which hospital. She had been forced to come to Germany to be a doctor. She was a doctor and her assignment was at that camp. She had been transferred there from Murnau in southern Germany, which was a Polish officers' camp. She told me that in general they were treated good as long as there was an abundance of food. But when there was a shortage of food, the last people to get it were the "kriegies"² and the forced labor people. Her name is Mrs. [Ilene, or Leopold, Mildon?], and she's the wife of a former professional Polish officer who was captured and spent the war in captivity and then became a member of the labor service unit for the United States Army after the war. They're very good friends of mine. I see them whenever I'm back East and she tells me many stories about that particular Göppingen area. She had to travel from camp to camp, there was more than one camp there, I understand, to give first aid. Then I knew another lady who was a dentist who was in that same area but

² Military slang for 'Kriegsgefangener', which is German for 'prisoners of war'.

not the same camp. I don't know the camp she was in. She was a Ukrainian. Her job was just to remove painful teeth. There was no filling of teeth or anything like that. If anybody got a toothache they just removed the tooth. That was her job. Her name was Kurlowa. She was Polish but lived in the Ukraine.

JL: Could you tell me about your initial gut reaction to all of the things that you saw and as you progressed and saw more?

WA: Like I say, I was young. At that time I was twenty-three. I hadn't had much of an education as far as world politics or geopolitics or really much in the way of history. I had only completed high school and had one year of commercial training. In those days, we really didn't know much about the world. We were very naive. And so I just have to say that I didn't believe what I read. Sure, I knew there were Jewish refugees coming into my hometown in New Jersey. As a matter of fact, Professor Mort Rothstein here lived in my hometown in Mt. Holly, New Jersey, from a period of about 1935 to 1938. His father was a baker and lived there. I didn't know Mort, but he went to school a couple years behind me because he's younger than I am.

JL: You didn't know them?

WA: No. I was just using that as a point. These refugees came into the United States during those years in the late 1930s and we would hear stories from them. Those who came to school would tell stories of the oppression and the things that were starting and the storm troopers and that sort of thing in Germany. But we were always skeptical. I knew I was. And I think others were too. We were skeptical. And I must say that there was a certain amount of resentment in my community because all of a sudden we took in a good number of people. I can think of the Salzmans who came in. The Salzmans must have sponsored two or three families, lots of people like this, and so there was a certain amount of resentment. But more than that, I think we didn't believe what the Jewish refugees were telling us. I suppose that attitude, consciously or unconsciously, stayed with me until I got into Germany and began to see with my own eyes what was taking place. First, it was only the labor unit and I can't say that all the labor units were Jewish. It doesn't matter whether they were Jewish or whether they were Gentile, they were being forced. That sort

of gave me a revulsion, to think that people would be treated that way. When you saw their condition, it was even further revolting. It was mainly in the area where there was industrial capacity that you saw them. As we got further down into the Tirol we didn't see them so much, only the prisoners of war. This is why I think it was a great shock to me to find a place like Dachau because I had not seen anything like that before. I'd heard about Dachau. I'd heard about it on the radio, I'd heard about it through word of mouth from officer to officer. We'd heard about the concentration camps. And I guess that's why, when the war ended and my division kept on going down into Austria and ended up on the Austrian-Italian border, and when I looked at a map and realized that Dachau was about 140 kilometers away, my then battalion executive officer, Colonel [Flesh?] — who is retired as I am, lives in Neosho, Missouri, and I see him once a year — we decided that as soon as we could, we would take a vehicle and go to Dachau. We wanted to see it. And again, this may have been the result of some skepticism on my part. I couldn't believe that anybody could be that heinous from what I'd heard. I think the war ended for us on [May] 5, [1945]. It actually ended officially on [May] 8. If I recall, [May] 8 was a Friday. I'm not sure. But on a Saturday, I'm not sure that this is the date.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

WA: Both Joe Flesch and I and a Lieutenant Northcutt, we had heard about this so, as soon as we could after we got our troops bedded down and I turned over my command to my executive officer, Joe and Ted Northcutt and I decided we'd take a jeep and drive on up. I believe this was a Sunday but it could have been a Saturday. I think the war ended for us on [May] 5, [1945], and this was two days later or not more than seventy-two hours. We drove up the valley and up through Murnau. We saw the prison camp there where they had kept the officers of the Polish army and we drove on up to Munich. Dachau sits on the northwestern side of Munich on the outskirts, probably about eight kilometers [from Munich]. And we went there. By that time, it had been liberated, the city had been liberated, the guards had been replaced by American guards. The camp was quite deserted, all the people had been taken out of there except some sick ones in the infirmary. They were still there. It was everything that I had seen, and the only pictures I'd ever seen were some that were smuggled in the newspapers. There was a water moat around it, double barbed wire. I'm not sure they were all the way around the camp, but the dogs were still in the runs, the races between the barbed wire. Of course, all we did was show our credentials — Colonel Flesch was then a major, I was a captain and Northcutt was a lieutenant — and they let us in. We parked our jeep in a regular parking place in the camp and began to walk around. We walked into some of the barracks and the conditions in which they lived were not dissimilar from some of the barracks that I'd seen where the labor people were put up. As I recall, there were wooden stanchions for bunks and they had straw mattresses, and in some cases they had a mattress cover for the bag to put that straw in. I don't recall seeing anybody in the barracks except, as I said, there were some sick ones in the sick bay and those barracks were a little better. But the most revolting thing was that when we finally went over to the area where the crematoriums were. And there, there were some low buildings with rooms, perhaps a little bigger than this one. I would say the rooms were twenty [feet] by twenty [feet]. And there, completely nude, were these corpses. Emaciated, their arms were no bigger than the bone in your arm. In some cases a thumb had been removed. In other cases a muscle out of the thigh had been removed. In other

cases the genitals had been mutilated. In other cases there were cuts in the thorax of the people. And, of course, it was obvious they had been there for some time. In some cases, they had just thrown lime on them. They had been there for a week or more in my judgment. And these were piled up just like cord wood. Piled one on top of the other — ten, twelve bodies high. There they were awaiting the movement to the crematoriums, which were not far away.

Now, I'd always thought that there might be more crematoriums than there were. I can only recall seeing either five or six ovens in a row and I would imagine on the other side there were six, too. What they had was a metal tray on wheels. They had wheels on one end and I think the other end fit in a track that went in these brick ovens. The doors on the oven didn't look any different than a furnace door that you'd find in a coal fired furnace. Alongside at least one or two of these sliding trays on which they slid the bodies into the ovens on, were galvanized iron cans. We looked in and at first couldn't realize what we were seeing, but actually we were seeing teeth that had been removed from these cadavers and thrown in there. They left in a bit of a hurry and the Americans didn't disturb a thing. They wanted everybody to see. They wanted the rest of the world to see and shortly thereafter they were inviting people into the camp. As I remember, they brought German officials in there, civil officials, they brought in the U.N. officials, to that particular camp to show them. I would say perhaps twenty-five yards away from the crematorium there was a very low building with steel doors, windows that you could see through the walls. These were the infamous showers. They had actually false shower heads. Although it would appear to me some of them did emit water because the floor was damp when I was in there. The floor looked as though water had been leaking on it from some place.

We went into the crematorium. I'm sure we had a guide, we had an American officer or sergeant as a guide, that took us to this particular part of the camp. We went in, I examined the shower head. I examined the walls, I examined the doors and everything I had heard about the gas chambers was true. By this time, after having seen those bodies and seen all this, I think all of us were a bit queasy in the stomach and we could hardly wait to get away from there. I remember it was a very bright, sunny

afternoon and we stayed on and looked around at the rest of the facility. I guess we stayed there perhaps three hours, two and a half. I don't recall any longer. But we stayed there long enough for me to get a number of photographs of the ovens. I had a new camera at that time and I had a number of photographs of the ovens, a number of photographs of the bodies stacked up, a number of photographs of the barbed wire runways, and the moat. I couldn't get photographs very well of the inside of the gas chambers because it was too dark. I had some, but they didn't turn out well. I kept these films, brought them back to the United States and had them developed by a photographer in my hometown of Mt. Holly, New Jersey, who's no longer in business. He's still alive but he's no longer in business. And they were quite unique and interesting to people when I showed them to a lot of people. When I was ordered back to Europe in the occupation, my wife and I brought all our belongings to Europe and I had the pictures and I showed them often to Germans who doubted that this ever existed.

JL: What was the Germans react to the photos?

WA: Well, their reaction ranged from disbelief to outright refutation. They said, "Oh, it never happened, it never happened. They just faked it. It's etched."

JL: What explanation did they suggest?

WA: Well, if you know the German people you know they don't have to make a suggestion, they make a decision and a conclusion and that's it. Many of them anyway. But I showed them to people like the *Burgermeister* of my city and the police chief and a good friend of mine who was head of the *Stadtesamt*,³ people like that. And, of course, they were intelligent people and they believed it. I'm talking about the man on the street, less intelligent. I don't know what happened to my photographs. They disappeared sometime between '48 and the end of 1949. I have a suspicion they might have been taken. We had a young girl who was a German nurse who was a nursemaid for our youngest boy. I still keep in touch with her in Germany, I know where she is. Her mother was visiting with us and became sick and her mother

³ German for 'city bureau'.

had been a minor Nazi but was very, very pro-Nazi. She had been denazified,⁴ as a matter of fact but even so, she still believed in Hitler, she believed in the good the Nazi regime did for Germany. I couldn't turn the woman out. She was sick, I gave her what quarters I had on the fourth floor. Her daughter nursed her until she was well enough and sent her back to her home. I have a hunch that that's where the pictures went but I can't say. When I showed her those pictures the first time she wouldn't accept that they were real.

JL: What did Americans think about them?

WA: Most of my American friends were officers. By that time they knew. I mean, they had the same degree of revulsion that I did. Most of them had never had the opportunity to see what I had seen. As officers they would have believed it. I don't think I ever encountered anybody that said, "No, we don't believe that, Bill." I don't know what happened to the negatives. I had the negatives at one time, but I think the negatives and the photos were all together. And they were large photos, I had them blown up. I had them developed from a small 130 [millimeter negative] to about five [inches] by six [inches], I think. I must have had forty of them, a whole roll-and-a-half or so. But that was the extent of my contact. I do recall they had a railroad siding nearby the camp, and I do recall going out there and seeing the boxcars. There were some bodies in those boxcars. We weren't allowed close enough to those to see them. But there were some bodies. The American commandant of the camp had that area cordoned off. What reason I don't know. It may have been for disease or it could have been a lot of things, because it was in the open, it wasn't behind fence, and he couldn't control it, so he had that cordoned off. The railroad siding came in outside the camp gates and I remember seeing that. But I didn't get close enough to examine it carefully to know what was in there. I just know that it looked to me like bodies in there, some bodies. You must remember in this first seventy-two hours or so he didn't have much chance to do anything and, to my knowledge,

⁴ Following the war, the Allies subjected many Nazis to an ideological retraining program referred to as denazification.

there was a small medical unit that was brought in and they had an engineer unit to purify water and I think that's the only troops he had at that time. This was a military government unit.

JL: What did they do with the people who were still in sick bay?

WA: That's what the medical unit was for. It was an American medical unit brought in to treat them.

JL: So the people who were actually still alive when they came to liberate them —

WA: Were still there, yes. The nearest army field hospital was some distance away at that time. This was in a real fast, fluid stage of the war, and the war went so fast those last few days that units were just fanned out all over Europe. I don't think we had the manpower or anything else. Later I understand they brought in a full field hospital and set it up right there. But at this time, this was so shortly after it was liberated, first aid was about all they could give them. Some of them were probably too far gone, you see.

JL: Did you have any impression of who the prisoners were, their nationality? Were they political prisoners?

WA: I don't know firsthand. I have heard since that there were Jewish and non-Jewish [prisoners], but that a number of them were political. But it's my impression that these were people that were marked for extermination at Dachau, the same as at Auschwitz. I believe that the famous Ilse Koch⁵ was at Dachau. I'm not sure though, she may have been at Sachsenhausen or she may have been at Auschwitz. I've heard that Ilse Koch was also at Dachau, she and her husband. But I don't know this.

JL: Did you have any impressions of the total number remaining in the camp?

WA: No, no, I don't know how many of the sick bay barracks were filled. I would say of the number of bodies that were still there awaiting cremation in the two buildings that I was in — now there may have been other buildings that I didn't see — in the two buildings that I was in, there were two rooms. One had about twenty bodies in it, another one could have had thirty-five or forty, that's the one where they were stacked up. There were two rooms in each of these buildings that I saw. In the third or the fourth room, maybe half a dozen, just a few on the floor. It looked as though they had just not been able to clean those out.

⁵ The wife of SS Col. Karl Koch, commandant of the Buchenwald concentration camp. After the war, Ilse Koch was found guilty of sadistically torturing and mutilating prisoners.

JL: Of the people that were alive, about how many were there?

WA: I don't really know. There may have been a lot in the sick bay, we didn't go through it. They didn't want us to go in the sick bay because there were contagious diseases. They couldn't very well stop us if we insisted we wanted to go, but we didn't insist. We had seen enough.

JL: Let me just got back to some more questions, after Göppingen where did you go?

WA: We went down through Neu-Olm, Kempten, Memmingen.

JL: Any other camps?

WA: I don't recall if there were any more camps that I encountered firsthand. My regiment might have, but at that time I had been pulled back into a reserved position from a flanking position and I came along after they exchanged me for another battalion that was leading the pursuit. By that time we were moving rather fast and it could well be. I did see a number of people in this brown uniform moving along the roads at times, but I don't know any more than that.

JL: In the limited contact that you did have with survivors, do you recall any conversations where aid was extended?

WA: Initially when we liberated them, we gave them everything we could. Again, an infantryman carries all his food on his back and he doesn't have very much. We gave them all the food and cigarettes and things like that that we could spare. However, when we located a camp like this, we immediately sent word to the rear of its exact location and an estimated number of people, although we couldn't always tell. This then was relayed to a military government unit who was following the combat units with food, medical supplies, and things like that.

Now where there was a storehouse of food that the Germans had, for example, I remember one town and I can't remember the name of it, we found great caches of cheese and wine and things that had been, this was down in Austria, it had been a store for the village, we "liberated" that to make it available to them. Generally we couldn't help there. We had to rely on the military government units that came up. That was their prime purpose, to take care of that.

JL: How did the prisoners react when you arrived? You told me before that they waved their arms in the air.

WA: Oh, God, they were so happy to see us. They'd try to hug us and kiss us and, oh, they were just so happy to be liberated, for the most part.

JL: So you were not active in the actual liberation?

WA: Not of Dachau, no. That was done by another division. I didn't get there until some time within the forty-eight or seventy-two hours following. But the evidence was still there.

JL: Did you have an opportunity to become especially friendly with individuals in the short contact that you did have at any of the other camps and maybe even at Dachau?

WA: No, not very. We had a concentration point down in Landeck, [Austria], where we brought all stragglers and people like this together to feed them. But it was operated by the military with Red Cross people who came in right away to help. We had some Italian prisoners of war, we had some displaced persons, we had all kinds of people in this concentration point. There we used the barracks of German units to provide them a place to sleep and [we] passed out what blankets we had. We fed them the same food that the American soldier was getting. But this was only a temporary thing until they were moved on to either go back to where they came from or, day after day trucks would come in to pick them up and take them away. I remember they all had to be, they sprayed DDT on them because vermin was pretty thick among them. But I got to know just casually in a day or two some people and we would listen to their stories of the brutality and the working conditions and things like that, which are pretty bad.

JL: Did they communicate in English?

WA: Many of them spoke German. We had German interpreters. I had two German interpreters in my unit. A good many of them spoke English and could talk. I had happened to have a number of people from Pennsylvania Dutch country in my unit and they could speak enough German or they could understand enough to communicate with these people. However, a lot of them spoke English, very haltingly, but did speak it.

JL: So you didn't have any close contact with any prisoners?

WA: No, not until after World War II when I was back in the army of occupation and the Butzbach UNRRA⁶ camp was right there. You see, I was in Butzbach and that was one of the big camps for the relocation people in the United States. So there I began to know a number of people. No, my contact was very limited. As a military officer in charge of a unit, you see, I would not have had occasion to have much contact.

JL: Did you get to know any outstanding inmates?

WA: No, I did not. Again, a limited amount of contact. And moreover, they were a little apprehensive of us because we represented the same thing that they had been subjected to because the military such as mine, the infantry units, were all there to maintain law and order. There were thousands of these people roaming around. In addition there were thousands of soldiers that had been just summarily discharged and told to go home.

JL: Now you did mention that in the first place that you were...

WA: Yeah, this was Füssen, I don't have a map but...

JL: At that time you mentioned that there were some SS in the hills. Did you see any German personnel at all in that town?

WA: No. The town had been garrisoned by a small SS detachment. Again, this was the fluid part of the war and we were moving very fast, and when we came into this town, they just disappeared. We were told by sympathetic Germans, and there's always a sympathetic German in every town, whether they're genuinely sympathetic or whether they're just trying to court favor as sycophants, I don't know, but we were told repeatedly that the SS had moved out and were just in the hills above us, and those were rather steep hills. So we had to have an exceptional amount of security in that town the short time we stayed there.

JL: So as you moved south you never had any resistance?

⁶ United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

WA: We ran into scattered resistance units, but not from the SS. This was an unusual case. Normally we ran against SS Panzer tank units, but normally we didn't run up against many SS soldiers in the entire time that I was in combat.

JL: But these were more general war [inaudible]?

WA: Yes.

JL: Did you find any German records?

WA: Oh, God, yeah. That's the one thing the Germans keep assiduously. They had more records and more stamps and things. And, sure, when our military government units came through, they were all targeted and most of the records were hauled away to Heddernheim, I believe, just outside Frankfort-am-Main. I'm sure that they got records.

JL: Were you able to decipher them?

WA: No, it wasn't our job to do that. We were the combat units and we were just moving through and taking territory. Lots of times we could if we captured a military document that indicated military operations. Sure we'd get that back to someone who could decipher it right away. But that didn't happen very often.

JL: Did you have contact with German civilians?

WA: No, at that time there was a nonfraternization policy. The only contact we had with Germans were to order them to do things, to keep law and order, to continue to administer their cities and territories, whether they were elected or appointed, to continue to do their job. So my contact was usually with an official of the German government, whether it be at the county or *Kreis*⁷ level or the *Stadt*⁸ or whatever.

JL: So you had no opportunity to get to hear about their attitudes or their knowledge of what went on in the camps?

WA: Not really. I think you could sense their attitudes. I think they looked down upon them as subhumans. I think you could sense that from the way they treated them.

⁷ German for 'district'.

⁸ German for 'city'.

JL: The German population?

WA: No, not the Germans themselves.

JL: No, I'm wondering about the attitude of the general German population?

WA: Oh, well, I think their attitude towards the inmates, the forced labor people, and anybody in the camp, was that they were subhuman. They had just despised them, looked down upon them. And then there's always an arrogance among German officials. It's as though they're just a cut better than the people they're administering to. You sense that as soon as when you deal with them. Even during the occupation this was true. The police chief has a certain attitude towards the people and the Burgermeister has a, this may have changed by now. I haven't been to Germany since 1958.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

JL: I'd like to pursue the attitude of the Germans, what was their actual..., the general population, did you get a feeling of their attitude towards the war?

WA: Of course, my observations would probably be not really valid because you find that [when a] conquering army comes in, there's a lot of obsequiousness, there's a lot of sycophant behavior. I never found a German who fought in the war except one, Mr. Melcher. He made the mistake one time of telling me where he happened to be, and I happened to be in the same place fighting opposite, and from that point on he wouldn't talk about his experiences. But very few Germans I've ever run into, naturally I'm being facetious, ever fought in the war. They all had noncombatant jobs. Those who did would tell you that they surrendered immediately because they really were tired of the war and they were glad to see the Americans come and they didn't fight hard against us. These are the kind of things that you heard. Now, anybody with a half a brain knows that this is not true. They fought hard and they fought well in many instances. In the latter days of the war I don't think they had the wherewithal to fight. But they fought. I know that when we used to pick up prisoners, their ammunition pouches were empty, and that doesn't indicate to me that they laid down their arms. It indicates to me they used it all up, and when they didn't have any more they... My own impression is that they supported Hitler very fanatically up through about 1943. In '44, when the shortages began to be apparent all the way down to the bottom, when the air raids became intolerable, they began to wonder could they win the war and from that point on I think the civilian morale was very bad. I do know that often when the German troops were dug in the front of a city and we were attacking, you'd begin to see white flags behind the German troops. That didn't indicate to me that they wanted to prosecute the war. I think in '44 the army was prosecuting the war and I don't know that the civil populace was 100 percent behind the war then. But I think up until '44 they were. Like I say, I had a German girl living in my house. As the sub-post commander of a little post at Butzbach, I had a number of German employees. My handyman or striker, we used to call him Pop, had been a soldier in World War I and had been called up in some kind of a noncombatant function in World War II.

Pop was an unusual German in that he was not sympathetic to the Nazis at all, and I think he was very genuinely not sympathetic. I got many of my impressions from talking with Pop and my employees during the occupation. But I can't help but think that I never met a German who ever fought, and I never met a German who admired Hitler, except the lady that lived in my house for a while, my *Kinderschwestern*⁹ mother. So I think that the, to sum it up, I think that they supported Hitler and tried to prosecute the war until it was pretty obvious that it was all over. By late '44, that was pretty apparent.

JL: What knowledge do you have, what impression do you have of the knowledge of these people of the camps?

WA: I had the opportunity to question people about the camps, naturally, with that set of pictures. And they all disavowed any knowledge. Just as the man you were speaking about. They disavowed it. But if you've ever smelled the stench of burning bodies, you're bound to be curious. Now, the people who lived in the little outskirts of Munich next to Dachau, I cannot believe that they did not smell the stench of burning bodies. Those smokestacks, as I remember, were perhaps thirty feet high. Now if the wind were blowing, as it's bound to blow in that mountainous area, it's bound to change. It had to blow over the city. I lived in Thailand next to a Buddhist temple. Now the Buddhists burn their bodies. After a person dies, they're kept in state in a reasonable time and then their bodies are burned, cremated. There's no mistaking the smell of burning human flesh and it's all permeating. I lived maybe four hundred yards away from that temple and I can't believe that they didn't -- the number of bodies that I understand were being cremated around the clock, twenty-four hours a day, I can't believe that they weren't curious about what was going on. Moreover, the trains came into the outside of the camp. The one or two tracks that came in there, didn't come in the camp. Even if they brought them in at night time, not all the Germans went to bed at nighttime. Some must have been out *spazieren*.¹⁰ Again, didn't any of them ask any questions? Munich is a pretty big city. Didn't anybody ever ask any questions? Didn't anybody ever discuss anything? What

⁹ German for 'nursemaids' or 'nannys'.

¹⁰ German for 'to stroll'.

did they think that camp was doing there? They'd see these trains coming in, in, in, in, all the time. None were going out. I can't believe that they didn't know it. I don't know anything about the other camps but just by viewing the proximity of the town from the little suburb, maybe it's Dachau, maybe that is the suburb of Munich. I can't believe that they didn't know it. But I've never yet had one admit that they knew anything about it. It's pretty hard to exterminate six million people and not have somebody know about it. Soldiers coming home on leave from these kind of things. The soldiers, in fact, did the cremating and I presume that the guards..., I know soldiers. They like to talk. They were bound to have told them. It's just incredible to me that they didn't know it. It's incredible.

JL: All the time that you were in Germany, did anyone ever think to tell you that they were aware?

WA: I don't ever recall it. I don't ever recall anybody ever admitting that they knew about these camps. And when you really gave it to them conclusively, such as showing them pictures, they'd say, "Ah, Hitler! Hitler! Ah, Hitler!" Just divest themselves of it. I don't know that there's anything they could have done, but at least they could admit that they knew it. That might be a step in the right direction. I don't know that there's a thing they could have done. I've since read [William L.] Shirer's *Third Reich* and I've read John Toland's book, but I can't believe they didn't know it. And that's the one thing that disturbs me the most about the whole thing: that no one ever admits it. Therefore, it's not really going to be a blot on their conscience the rest of their lives. Whole new generations are growing up refuting it probably, so I think we might have lost. We might have lost. I'm told that Dachau is still intact and still a monument. I haven't visited, did you see it? I understood that a monument has been raised inside the grounds, and well it should be. Most horrible crime ever committed on humanity. Even now, forty years later, it's just impossible for me to believe it, and I've seen it. It's impossible for me to believe the magnitude of it, is what I'm saying. Maybe that's what sets into the Germans. Maybe that's why they don't want to believe it.

JL: I'd just like to pursue for a moment, you talked about Landeck before and Butzbach. Were there any other DP camps that you were able to visit?

WA: No. Butzbach was really for rehabilitation and transfer to the United States or to other countries. People went to all countries from Butzbach.

JL: Wasn't that an official DP camp?

WA: Yes, it was run by the UNRRA and after that it was UN something, I don't know. But they sent them to Canada, they sent them to the United States, they sent them to Brazil, to Argentina.

JL: What was your role at Butzbach?

WA: In Butzbach I had a labor supervision unit, a small detachment of American troops that employed Polish displaced persons in units that supplanted the United States Army. For example I had an engineer company, I had an ordnance service company, I had military police companies. After the war everybody wanted to come home. All of the nonprofessional soldiers want to get home and get out of the army as quickly as they could. So when they let them go home we had, well [for example], the Polish Second Corps in Italy. They couldn't go back to Poland. The Russians had gotten Poland, they couldn't go back. They stayed on for years awaiting transfer to another country, awaiting immigration to another country. While they were there, for lots of reasons, for one thing to keep their self-respect, they were given uniforms and put into labor service units and performed a good job, as well as the American soldiers could in many cases, and in return we paid them so much in script per month, so much in German marks per month, provided them quarters, food and clothing. I had about 2,000 of those people in five different units.

JL: How long did people stay?

WA: In most cases they stayed in the unit long enough to receive a visa to some other country. In the latter years some of them went back to Poland. Not very many.

JL: Were these mostly Jews or non-Jews?

WA: These were mixed. There were a number of Polish Jews, but by and large as you know, Poland is 95 percent Catholic, so most were Christians. But, yes, there were some Jews in the units. A number of Jewish officers in these units from Poland, particularly from around Krakow. We generally could tell those that were of Jewish extraction because they had a different kind of name. They didn't have Dembowski

and this kind of name. They had names like Geppert. They didn't have names like Stanaslowski. Their names were different, that's generally the way you could...

The one thing I did not notice ever in one of those Polish service units was any discrimination towards the Jews in the few that we had. Because they were all displaced, they all had been prisoners at one time or they had been forced laborers, and there was a common bond, I think, among them. I remember I had a young soldier that was Jewish in my supervisory detachment and the Jewish lads in the labor service units all were very, very friendly with him. I'm trying to think of his name, it was a name like Rueter. They were very friendly with him and he arranged to get a rabbi from one of the camps, I think it was near Frankfurt, to come every so often to them.

JL: From the DP camp?

WA: Yes, from one of the DP camps. I don't know whether it was the American Jewish Congress or what provided these people. I think it was the American Jewish Congress. There were a lot of agencies operating there at that time. There was the National Catholic Welfare and American Jewish Congress and there was another Jewish unit. The Friends' Service units were operating. But I know that they used to have a service, infrequently, for the Jewish boys. There weren't many in the 2,200 people that I had, but there were some.

JL: Were these, you say the Jewish boys, you had totally military people?

WA: They were Polish Jewish lads.

JL: Were their families with them, any of them?

WA: I don't recall any of the Jewish lads having their families with them. Some of the noncommissioned officers who were non-Jewish, Gentiles, had their families with them. But they were generally the ones who had been professional Polish soldiers and had been in prisoner of war camps. Or they had acquired a family, they had acquired a family. Some of them married German girls.

JL: How long were you there for?

WA: I was there about three years, a couple months short of three years. From December '46 until November of '49.

JL: And then it closed down?

WA: No, my military unit was still there. I don't know when the camp closed down. When I went back there in 1958, of course it was closed down. That's the rehabilitation camp. No, I had a mission there and the fellow who replaced me stayed there for another couple, three years.

JL: Just a couple more questions, you mentioned the rabbis being sent in. Did you have generally any contact with the army chaplains?

WA: Yeah we had...my detachment was too small to have a chaplain visit on regular intervals. We went to the church seven or eight miles away in a town called Bad Nauheim, where there was an American chaplain who conducted Protestant services. There were also Catholic services. But this was the Polish unit and they had their own Catholic chaplain because, as I said, they're 95 percent Catholic. The Catholic chaplain would come around regularly, about once every two or three weeks, every two weeks. But the number of Jewish lads that were in these different companies, they had this sort of catch-as-catch-can. There weren't that many rabbis in the whole zone, I suppose, and those that were there were there tending to the rehab camps and things like that. But they would arrange for this one chaplain, this one rabbi to come when he could. I can't remember his name any longer. I used to call him Father just to tease him. He was good about it.

JL: What was his name?

WA: I can't remember his name any longer. It was a name like Rabinowitz or some name. I don't know what it was. I can picture him but I don't remember his name. But when he'd come, they'd always have a spread for him. As I recall he used to come on Fridays and they always had something for him. He'd come around noon on Friday and they'd have something. I would frequently get invited to these things, you see. I remember I used to call him Father.

JL: Are you the recipient of any honors bestowed by the US Army?

WA: By the army? Well, no, other than the normal decorations that you get in the course of [a career], I have a Legion of Merit, a Bronze Star and that kind of [thing], but they're normal military. Nothing other than that. I have one decoration that was given to me, which I couldn't accept, from the Polish. I have the decoration but I can't accept it officially; we're not allowed to. Well, you can do it. You can request permission of the president to accept it, but I never went through that.

JL: What decoration?

WA: I don't know the...It's an honorarium, like a humane medal. I guess the closest thing we would say is that it's the American Humane Service Medal.

JL: What time was this?

WA: This was in 19...It was awarded to me by the head of the labor service in the occupied zone on behalf of the government in exile, so it doesn't really mean much, but it meant a lot to me at the time. And I still have the medal. It isn't really a medal. It's sort of a medallion.

JL: When was that awarded?

WA: This was I think '48 it was given to me.

JL: You mentioned that those photos were gone, do you have any personal letters from that time?

WA: No, I don't think so. I might have some letters that I wrote to my wife describing what I saw, but I am in the process of dismantling my household now and I may run across them. If I do I'll save them.

JL: I'm sure you have pictures of yourself in uniform.

WA: Yes.

JL: And one final question, do you have any names, addresses, or telephone numbers of other Americans...?

WA: Who know of these things? Yes. Colonel Joseph Flesch was with me. Joseph Flesch, from Neosho, Missouri.

JL: Also others, you mentioned others?

WA: No, I don't I suppose. Lieutenant Northcutt is dead. No, but I tell you, we're going to have our regimental reunion on August 31 and September 2 of this year. I'll ask anybody. I can do that. Because we'll have

about four to five hundred people and their experiences may have been dissimilar to mine. Sure, I'll be happy to ask them.

JL: That's all that I have to ask you. Is there anything that you'd like to add?

WA: No, I don't think so. I think I've covered my limited experience. But I think my experience is probably unique. I don't suppose that more than one-tenth of 1 percent of the people in the American army have had that same opportunity to see this type of thing.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

END OF TRANSCRIPT