

TRANSCRIPTION OF TAPE OF JAMES D. REESE

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Interviewer: Dr. Fred Crawford
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- Q. If you would first give us your full name.
- A. I'm James Dodd Reese.
- Q. And we're down at St. Simons Island and you were a chaplain during WWII.
- A. Correct.
- Q. And the unit that you served, for example let's say, at the time you started overseas.
- A. I was with the 13th Infantry Regiment, which was one of the three regiments of the 8th Infantry Division. We left N.Y. in November 1943, landed in Northern Ireland in early December, left Northern Ireland at the end of June and went into France on July 4, 1944. Our first hostile shots were fired by our artillery the night of July 5th. July 8th, our regiment was committed near the Heau de Peau (?). Our action there centered around the breakthrough so that the armour could break through and spread out over France. We then went to Rein (?) about a unit that had been bypassed by the armour. After clearing that out we went to Brest (?) and there had one of the worst firefights that we had. After clearing out the area around Brest we went to the border of Luxemburg. We moved from there up near Aken(?) in Germany in the Herken Forrest and we were there making the northern hinge for the Battle of the Bulge. After we got that straightened out we went across to Cologne; from Cologne we then went to Luxemburg. I beg your pardon, from Cologne we went into the Siegen (?) River area and then we doubled back
1 in that great industrial area around Dusseldorf. On the first of May we were sent as a part of the British Second Army, the 82nd Airborne Division and the 8th Infantry Division were really and truly the British Second Army that crossed the River Elbe. We crossed that on the 2nd and

it was during the day of the 2nd that we came to the little concentration camp at Ludwigslust, which is in the Province of Mecklinburg. It's now East Germany, which is a part of the Communist stronghold.

Q. Did you know anything about the camp being there before you ran across it?

A. At that particular time I had been promoted from Regimental Chaplain of the 13th Infantry to the Assistant Division Chaplain and my assignment at that time, instead of being with the active fighting groups, I was more in an administrative job. Personally I did not know about it but I'm very sure that our Division Commander and Regimental commanders and people of that kind knew about it. I found out about it the night that our men went in and took Ludwigslust. Of course, there was no fighting there. When we went into the province of Mecklinburg we had one entire German corps to surrender to us. Our Division Commander directed that they stack their arms and that their officers remain in command of their units. And then we had the job of trying to feed that number of people and taking over several hundred thousand displaced persons plus this camp at Ludwigslust, this prison.

Q. When did you first see this camp?

A. I went in the morning of , I believe it was the 3rd of May.

Q. About what time?

A. When I went in it must have been around 9:00 in the morning. The medics had been in there the night before and had evacuated the people who were, who had to be moved by ambulances. They were, at the same time, trying to give food and medication to a number who still were there. All of the dead were there.

Q. How many people, is there an estimate of the number of persons in the camp?

Is there an estimate of the number of persons in the camp when it was liberated?

A. As best I can get there were probably less than a thousand, right close to a thousand.

Q. How many of those bodies were there in the camp?

A. We found a total of about 555.

Q. Do you know, was there any way to tell why they had died?

A. Oh yes, we had 155 of them that was stacked in one large latrine and most of them had evidently died from malnutrition. Human bodies with thighs that you could tkae your hand and reach around and make your thumb and finger join. They had literally been starved to death.

Q. Had any of them been shot?

A. So far as I know I didn't see any that had been shot. The thing that we were concerned with was the impact of most of them having died of malnutrition.

Q. Yes.

A. Just to give you an idea of what it was..in one of the buildings..

Q. You do have some photographs here. Did you take these photographs?

A. No,the Division Chaplain, Chaplain Wallaman (?) took those photographs. You see those men? They were the healthy menand see how emaciated they were.

Q. Was there any knowledge about what countries they came from?

A. Most of them that I came in contact with were German.

Q. Were German civilian types?

A. Yes. There was one 14 year old boy in there who was accused of not working hard enough in a typewriter factory and at the age of 14 he was so small that after we had fattened him up some of the men put him in a duffel bag and smuggled him on board the ship.

Q. And brought him back to the States?

A. Yes. Do you remember ther was quite a controversy about it for a while when he was discovered. The Captain of the ship wanted to take that regiment back to LaHave (?) where we had left and one of the cooks and the Regimental Commander said that one or the other of them wanted to adopt the boy. But he was a likeable kid and that just gives you an idea of what happens when people get so emotionally wrought up and their system of justice breaks down.

Q. Would you read the caption of the back of this first picture.

A. "A group of the better cared for prisoners from the camp at Wibling (?) or Ludwigslust"

Q. And this shows, it looks like a brick building and these men in their striped prison garb standing looking at the camera.. ----- say 14 years old. Was there any older ones in there?

A. Yes. I would judge to be oh, 30.

Q. Were there any women in the camp?

A. No. The camp for the women was right down the road from there. Now here's a picture showing the women and you'll notice I've written on the back

Q. Yes. Read the back of that one please, Sir.

A. These were Russian women. They were from the women's section of the camp. They received more food and personal attention from the guards. You see, they...You can't tell too much about them but they don't have that emaciated look that these men had.

Q. Here's one holding a child. It looks like...

A. Oh yes. They had their children with them.

Q. Some of them may ~~xxxx~~ even have become pregnant while they were imprisoned and these were the children of....

A. Oh sure.

- Q.of the guards who served...the women served the guards as sexual outlets.
- A. Oh, sure.
- Q. This is another fact that needs to be confirmed.
- A. Yes.
- Q. Here's a third photograph which shows a GI in his overcoat. These are not in sequence....go ahead.
- A. This actually was Chaplain Wallaman and this is the area in the town of Schwereen (?) which is just north of Ludwigslust and one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen and there our Division Commander had the Mayor to prepare graves for the 555 or 6 people whose bodies were found. We found 150-some in the latrine that I just told you about just now...the washroom. And in a common grave, we dug up approximately 400 more.
- Q. How long had they been buried?
- A. We figured less than three weeks.
- Q. So all of these deaths occurred really in the last months of the war? Is there an ~~arrow~~ on the back of the....no, but that's an interesting photograph. What about the last ~~one~~ two?
- A. These are scenes...this is a scene...I can't identify them but the Mayor of Schwereen is out there digging just like everyone else.
- Q. Now this is where the bodies were or is this preparing the new graves?
- A. These are the new graves. It was in a city park there in Schwereen. And this is a photograph of the people who turned out for the mass burial.
- Q. From the city and the country, the little town around Schwereen?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Do you think they knew what was going on in that camp?
- A. You know that's one of the interesting things. They said they did not and the question that we heard more than any other question was, "Where was the church during this time?" And that was the question that the

Mayor asked, large numbers of business people asked it. "Where was the Church?" "Why didn't the Church tell us about what was happening?"

Q. Were there any indications that these people were not Jewish? Did anyone ever say whether they were Jewish or not?

A. So far as I know that had not been determined when we left because they pulled our division out rather quickly after we had ~~left~~ completed our fighting because we were one of the three divisions being sent back to the states in preparation for going to Japan.

Q. This looks like a large mass of people. Were these the town people?

A. Yes. Those were the townfolks. They were, shall we say, "invited" to the funeral that afternoon.

Q. It looks like one person here may be rubbing his eyes. You see that person in the foreground?

A. I can't tell.

Q. His hand is up to his face.

A. The emotional impact of this when it actually broke on the people in Schwereen was something that was terrific.

Q. Tell us about that. That's very important.

A. They seemed to be surprised, humiliated and embarrassed that that type of inhumanity had been practiced right around them. Being in an administrative job ~~xxxx~~ during this time the part that I got in on most that you might be interested in was the administrative work of trying to get people in the right place for services and that type of situation. But, in interviewing the pastor of one of the downtown Churches.

Q. Was it a Lutheran church?

A. It was a Lutheran church, evangelistic, and he was giving us information about how the church had deteriorated and he was one of the ones who was very strong in the confessional group. Now, right out near where this

picture was made a new little church, as it was described, that we had our 8th division services in. It was new and it was only 2 or 3 years old. It was small in that it had been built right on the edge of town but there were several interesting things. I did not speak German but we had a Lutheran chaplain who was very fluent in German who talked with the Pastor of the church and there were certain things that sort of stuck in my mind and surprised me. They carried on their church roles the names of 20,000 baptised people...in a church that....as I said, it's a little church. And in that church the Pastor told us he knew of two bibles. One was chained to the pulpit and the other one was in his study. He only had one bible himself. And they had worship service at about 10:00 and a Baptismal service at noon and they would have more people at the Baptismal service than they would have at the worship service. The people still wanted their children baptised but it made very little difference to them until the horror of this camp was brought out and then they were asking, "Where was the church?" And that has influenced me in my ministry since getting out of the army in 1945. I have felt that the church has got to take a stand on what's right and what's wrong.

XX But, getting back to this camp. To give you an idea of the horror we found there. In the building we were looking at just now they had gone in and arranged beds. There would be three beds on the floor, 18" up would be laced barbed wire with pine straw on it. Three more men sleeping up there. And then 18" up three more. When the medics went in there, of course, the GI's going in they would maybe the man sleeping in the middle dead, who had starved to death and the two on either side of him would either bat their eyes or turn their heads/^{or make a little motion} to let them know that they were still alive. And the medics took those people out and started giving them soup and broth and medication and trying to keep

them from dying.

Q. Did anyone find out ~~ix~~ how long it had been since those prisoners had been fed?

A. They had been given sugar beets every day.

Q. Was it that they didn't have food? Maybe they were short of food?

A. They were actually short of food in that area. You see, we had to feed the prisoners of war and the displaced persons. We would get a two-horse wagon load of potatoes and take it to a field that had 10,000 displaced persons in it and tell them to ~~just~~ kill and eat. And they would kill those two horses and cook the potatoes with that meat and try it to feed. Now, that's all we could do. See, we didn't have for the first few days...that's the best we could do.

Q. Tell me something about the displaced persons? Were they...they were not soldiers?

A. No. The displaced persons were the people who were fleeing. They were from, I saw one man from Lithuania; quite a number from...well, most of them were from East Germany and the countries just east of Germany. Some of them even Russians.

Q. They were fleeing from the Russians really.

A. Well, not necessarily fleeing from the Russians...The Russians themselves. They were just being herded back.

Q. And there were men, women, children?

A. Oh, yes, families.

Q. And they had nothing? Just the clothes on their backs?

A. Maybe they'd have a gold watch or...

Q. But they were not prisoners?

A. No these were not. They were just people who were herded into the big fields and then a few days later ~~if~~ we could get trains in we'd begin moving them out by the trainload going back to those eastern countries or wherever they could be sent. But we had to get them out of there because we did not have the food or the provisions to feed them.

Q. Now let's go back again to the prisoners for a moment. You mentioned that these may well, in the men's camp, be German citizens. Was there ever any information about the kinds of crimes or what this one boy you mentioned had been punished or put in there because he hadn't worked hard enough in a factory. What about some of the others? Any information about why they were there?

A. Most of them were the same kind of things. They were thought to be

maybe disloyal to the government in some way.

Q. Had any of them taken stands against Hitler or against the Nazis?

A. I don't know because I wasn't there long enough for the interviews following that.

Q. You actually got into the camps to see these things? To see what happened to some of them?

A. Oh, yes. I actually went in.

Q. Do you have any other memories of your first entrance into the camp? Was there an odor about the camp that you recall?

A. When you have 150 bodies that are unburied you have a very distinct odor.

Q. How long would you estimate that that lasted? Within a day, two days or three days?

A. Two days to three at the most. I never did find out exactly what happened when at that camp they realized that the American army was coming in. The English.. they thought it was English but it turned out that we were all Americans going in and that could have been a very definite disruption of food supplies. The coming in because of the military situation and with the German army trying to get supplies in and out the food for the prisoners was rather low priority. See one of the things that people very often forget is that under Hitler and his regime there was a very definite feeling that we ~~were~~ will put the old and the very sick people in the most dangerous position because we lose less if an old person dies than we do if a young person dies and the sick and the people who were thought to be disloyal were pushed off and the priorities for trying to save them meant that the soldiers got bread and the people who were thought to be loyal got the food first. What was left over at that stage was what those people could get.

Q. In talking about ^{what happened to} these people who survived was there any information about where some of them went to for medical care? Where did they go? Was there any ^{idea of} ~~information about~~ whether they were going to stay in that area or whether they were going to try to find a place in Germany.

A. You see, being with a combat unit, after we got these people we turned them over to the civilian authorities?

Q. To the German civilian authorities?

A. Yes. Add to our military government.

Q. Right.

A. You see, a combat unit can't be tied down with that sort of thing. We've got to be on the go. And mine was a combat unit. We had them for a few hours or a couple of days.

Q. But there really wasn't any fighting around the camp itself?

A. No.the guards had evidently left.

Q. Were there any guards left or had they....

A. If there were any guards there it was just, they were staying as a humanitarian gesture because we crossed the River Elbe and it was more than 24 hours before we actually got to the camp. Up until two days before, probably all the guards were there.

Q.were the guards, as far as physically, were they undernourished or did they look in good shape?

A. No. No. They had the same ^{type of} food that the soldiers had.

Q. Were they Wermacht? Could you tell whether they were SS or Wermacht? Or did anybody say anything about them?

A. No. I think they were more civilian.

Q. Kidn of like the Peoples Army?

A. It was still under the supervision of the military but they were using civilians to operate it. The able bodied men were being pushed forward all the time, to get into combat.

Q. What did the Lutheran chaplain with you who spoke German, was there anything else that he learned ~~xxxxxx~~ as he talked with the inmates that you remember?

A. No. Nothing that I know of. He did a great deal of work with the military government people and also liason with the civilian community.

Q. What was your rank at the thime this occurred?

A. I got my promotion about two or three days afterwards. I became a Major.

Q. And y'all went on through...the war ended on May 8th.

A. Actually for us the last hostile shot was fired on the night of the 2nd as we were crossing the Elbe. You see, to get a picture of what happened there, here is an army Corps in the province of Mecklinberg. It is surrendering, ^{they're} ~~xxxx~~ out of food.....There are over 100,000 people who are ^{refugees} trying to move West. We met the Russian army. That's where we met them.

We caught this mass between us and the Russians. I don't know how many the Russians took over. You know that we got a tremendous number of refugees and Prisoners of War.

Q. When you say prisoners-of-war? Of which nations? O f which nations?

A. Germans.

Q. I see what you mean. These were German soldiers?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you find any Russian or American or British ^{people who had been} prisoners of war in this particular area?

A. Not that I remember.

Q. Did anyone ever mention Bergen-Belsen, the camp that was opened up earlier by the British north of this area?

~~xxxxxxx~~

A. No.

Q. This is really an amazing story. And you pointed out that having seen this place it affected your ~~life~~ life. Could you tell us more about that. You ended your active service in '45 after you came home. You stayed in the reserves until retirement, isn't that correct?

A. Yes.

Q. Tell us about your life after this time.

A. Well, when I came back I went back into the pastorate and I spent five years at Telm (?), Ga. as pastor of the church there and then went back to Emory in the summer of '50 for graduate work and in '51 I completed the Master of Theology degree and then went to Cross Keys in Macon and then Maxley, Trinity, Waycross, Cherokee Heights and Macon and then South Columbus which is right near Ft. Benning. The thing that made me reevaluate all of my priorities, the things that I had thought were so important, after seeing the deprivation in the people and seeing what real need was I reevaluated and I became more convinced than ever that as people think so they're going to act and we have got to, and the church has got to take a strong stand in trying to see that, well the admonition of Michael, what does the Lord require of thee but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with thy God. I got involved in a behind the scenes situation when I was in Waycross. Several of the leading business men and I talked. I was the only minister in the group and we began getting ready to meet integration. The chief of police was a member of my church and I was with the group of men the morning that they decided that they were going to integrate all of the lunch counters.

Q. When was this? What year was this? Do you remember the year?

A. During the time they were having the hot summer in Albany.

Q. The 60's?

A.and Selma.No, it would be about '61, '62,'63. I think '63 it was. And I saw those businessmen take a stand that morning that they were going to do this and one of the things that impressed me, some man noted the fact that I was the only minister there and he raised the question, what are we going to be able to count on from the churches when we go into this desegregation. And one of the Presbyterian elders got up and said, "All of my ~~whole~~ life my church and my pastor have been teaching me what is right and wrong and today I have got to make the decision myself and I don't need my church today, nor my preacher. They've done what should have been done for me and this is my decision and I'm going with it." And you know when you see people who take a stand in a community like that and think about what happened in Germany where you couldn't get that kind of stand, that's the great contrast.

Q. Were you married at the time you were in WW II?

A. Yes.

Q. How old were you in 1945 when you saw this camp? That would be 35 years ago.

A. Let's see, I was born in 1909. I was about 33 or 34.

Q. You were still a young man. When you came home did you tell anyone about the camp and what you had seen those last few days of the

A. Yes.

Q. What was their reaction to you. Did they believe the story of the camp?

A. Shock.

Q. Did they see your photographs?

A. Yes. A number of people did.

Q. But they would accept the fact that you were telling them, you could verify?

A. Oh yes.

Q. Because we have learned now that there are a lot of people in this country who really do not believe that those concentration camps existed.

A. I don't remember coming in contact with anyone who gave any indication whatsoever they doubted what I was saying.

Q. You told your wife?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you have children? Did they know the story of what had happened?

A. Yes.

Q. That's an amazing thing. Did you by any chance see the "Holocaust" television show when it was played last ~~year~~ April?

A. No. I missed that for some reason.

Q. Did you hear anybody talking about it?

A. Oh yes.

Q. Did they, what did they think? Did they think it was a true story? Did they believe the Germans could do something like that?

A. Well, right now with the group of people who are my friends and particularly the people on the Island there are so many of them who were military and closely related to the military and ~~they just~~ they don't question, they knew.

Q. They knew?

A. They knew. You see in our church we must have at least 10 or 12 men who had the rank of Colonel or Captain.

Q. I was talking with Charlie Hayes this morning.

A. Oh, you know Charlie?

Q. Oh yes, he was up at Emory but he says one of their joys is that you come over and preach at their Presbyterian church, in fact I think you're supposed to preach there this month or something.

A. Yes, the last Sunday in July.

Q. That was great for him. So you're still quite active in your ministry even though both have retired in one sense it certainly hasn't retired you from going on with your work.

A. No

Q. That's beautiful. Do you think that we should tell this younger generation about the concentration camps, about what happened?

- A. By all means because if we have a generation of people coming up who think that kind of thing cannot happen they're in for great trouble and disappointment. And the thing that is so distressing to me is that that kind of thing can happen to most any of us, come right out.
- Q. What should we be teaching this current young generation about the Holocaust and about it happening again? About perhaps even what the church might do?
- A. To me, I think we've got to keep that more or less in the background as a negative type of warning but teach today a more positive approach to life, of striving to find out what it means to do justly, what it means to be honest, the words integrity, character, dependability, duty...these are the type of things that have got to be instilled into the minds of our youth today. We've also got to get them taking a positive look as many of them are doing today, at those values in life that are not material. Many of our youngsters today, I find, are very concerned about values other than material values.
- Q. One of the comments that we've gotten both from the people who were, particularly Jews who were in these camps, was that somehow God had forsaken them, that this God that we believe in who is a God of love would not have let something as awful as the concentration camps happen. What.. you've mentioned, and this is really tremendously clear, I think the first time we've actually gotten this insight into the Christian churches in Germany ~~was~~ was with your ~~insightful~~ comments about it, Would this imply that the citizens in Germany were not very religious for they were certainly not involved in church participation? Had they forsaken their religion?
- A. I don't think I would say they had forsaken it. They had neglected it. They certainly had not repudiated it. They were not practicing it. I think another thing that we've got to help people understand today is that, of course, we get it in our concepts as Protestants and as Christians, the ideology of individual freedom of choice. We don't believe, and I think we've got to teach this to people, that God is not going to make bullets curve to miss you because you're a good boy. The rain falls on the just and the unjust and I'm very much out of

step today with this rather popular type of thing, if you be a good boy God's going to take care of you. He'll take care of you, but, in what way? He's going to expect you...when I was in combat I never did think that any man that I saw killed by German action was killed because God let him be killed or that it was the will of God. And the time that I was worked over, and I did get worked over very carefully by a sniper one day, and many times ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ they were marked whosoever will but that one wasn't marked for me. But that was not the will of God, it was the will of that man who was shooting. And he was using a gun that was just as accurate as the guns we had, and so as an individual I had to look out for myself, but we've got to let people know and we've got to let it be very definite and clear that individual (loud noise)

woman one day asking the question, why did God let this happen to my son. He had been arrested several times for drunken driving and he was out one Sunday afternoon, without a drivers license, drunk, hit a car, killed five people in it, and his mother said, why did God let this happen to my son? God didnt, because God let that boy have the same freedom he let anybody else to have and he chose, out of his freedom, to get drunk again.

Q. And Drive the car.

A. And drive the car. And that freedom, now there's something that I'm terribly concerned about. All of this talk that we have today about freedom. Yes, you are free, but, you're not free to step on another man's toes or to hit his chin or to deprive him of his rights also. But the worst criminal you can find today and the worst criminal we found war criminals were people that God let them have the choice of becoming saints or becoming the type of criminal they..and they chose to become criminals.

Q. What do you think of capital punishment then in terms of this person selecting to do these crimes?

A. I've got mixed feelings about capital punishment and I can't give you a ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ categorical yes or no because there are several problems. One is looking

at strict justice the person who has taken a life wilfully and maliciously of another person. Like this, the fiend that goes out here and kills a little child. When it comes to what he deserves, capital punishment would certainly be in line. Now, when you begin looking at the other side of it, who's going to throw the switch. That's the big problem.

- Q. One of the peculiar things about 1979 is that this is the 35th year where the statute of limitations on the Nazi war criminals is due to expire. In Germany the laws about homicides are different from ours. Ours, if a homicide is committed, a person can always be tried. In Germany there was a 20 year statute of limitations which was extended at the request of the allied forces for first five years and then ~~the~~ additional years and it's expiring right now. So one of the efforts is to be sure that the Federal Republic of Germany, in other words free West Germany continue the criminalization of the Nazi war criminals because there are evidently some numbers who have never been caught. They've never been identified really. Somewhere in Brazil, they don't know where...some are in this country. What is your own thinking about the Nazis as the guilty group. ~~should~~ should this statute of limitations be continued or is it time to let it go.
- A. I'm rather inclined to let it go because these persons who are guilty have had to live with that sense of guilt for all these numbers of years. And who can tell but what their suffering because of their guilt has been more intense on them than was execution on the part of those who were executed. Because they've had a living memory of these types of things.
- Q. Then the idea of forgiveness is part of the christian heritage?
- A. I think that this far away, I myself feel, let's wipe the slate clean.
- Q. Let's go back to just a couple of other points because, as you mentioned, it can happen again. Some say it is happening again in Viet Nam, in Cambodia, even with the change in Iran where all of a sudden Hitler's writings, "Mein Kampf", for example has been translated into Arabic and their.. Again, after the Jews was the concentration camp effort of the Nazi focus mostly on the Jews? We know that these people in this camp ^{probably} were ~~mostly~~ not Jewish in this camp. But had you picked up

anything about the Jew being singled out^d as a major target of the Nazis?

- A. In the area that we went through we were not as aware of the Jew per se because by that time so many of the Jews had been removed from their communities that that was a rather mute matter so far as our area that we were in combat.
- Q. You've done something very important for us and for Emory and even for the Methodist Church because we've gotten two small gifts. ~~From~~ One was from the Methodist Church and I felt so good that they understood what we are trying to do, so on behalf of all of us, thank you so very much.
- A. Thank you.