

Excerpt from Oral History Interview with Max Keen

Max Keen was interviewed as part of the World War II Survivors Oral History Project during the Fall 2001 semester by Evelyne Lussier, a CSUN student. Keen served under General George S. Patton in the Third United States Army as Allied forces advanced into Nazi Germany in the war's final days. In this clip he describes what he saw when liberating a small concentration camp and its impact on him and his fellow soldiers.

Transcript:

MK: We went to this small town and they had a small, they had a concentration camp. I can't remember the name of it, but it's in the book. It wasn't one of the big ones but it was... later on when we liberated it I found out they had mostly Russian girls, some Jewish girls, but it was mostly girls. And when we got in there and I saw the town and I saw the concentration camp. It was empty; all the soldiers that were head of the concentration camp they all left, but they left the prisoners. They didn't tell the prisoners where they were going, they just took everything, all important papers and everything. And when I saw the concentration camp and saw all the dead bodies, well, it was a bad, I mean, you couldn't believe, me being 19 years old at the time, I could not believe what I was looking at... It just... I cried. I think everybody in outfit cried, because we just didn't believe that somebody would do something to these people like we saw.

EL: Were there a lot of bodies left?

MK: I'd say there was two thousand bodies or better that were just naked and bones... It was all bones and everything. They were on top of each other. I'd say one pile of bodies was almost as high as this house, and they had a whole bunch of them... Graves dug out because they... We found out that they put twenty to thirty bodies in one grave sometimes and just covered them up. Well, we liberated the women that were there. At first, they didn't know what... The girls, the women, were scared; they were afraid to come out, they didn't know... They knew we were Americans, but they didn't know if we were good or if we were just as bad as the Germans. When they found out how nice we were and the things we gave them candy bars and everything else, and camp food and they started... I'd say one percent could speak English, the rest could only speak their own language... And then we went into the town, there was a town there, it wasn't a big town, I'd say it had about three hundred homes in the town. Our quartermaster, he went into town and he got clothes for these people, and we gave them to all these people because they had no clothes, it was shabby clothes. From my understanding, it was the same clothes they had been wearing for three years and we all... Somehow during our battles we confiscated some German money, it was money that was printed by Germany in 1937. As soldiers we didn't know that the money was any good, so the amount of money that we had, which was a few thousand dollars, we gave each girl as they were leaving, we gave each girl some of the money... They saw... They were just flabbergasted, they gave kisses and everything. We were there about a day and a half and they organized, the town people, they had to come to the concentration camp and they had to do the digging, and separate the bodies.

EL: The dead bodies?

MK: I guess so, I didn't see it all, we left there. At that time, I was a soldier, I wasn't 19 years old anymore, I was a man, I really was a man. Then I knew that I had to, that we had to win this war because there was no reason that this should ever happen again, what I just saw, there was no reason in the world. And we all felt as though that we didn't want to take any... I was in the third army, General Patton, and as far as he was concerned he didn't want any more, after we went through there, all of our battalion, we felt as though we didn't want to take any more prisoners. We would just about kill them all... We were really... We were that mad... We were... To put it in words, it's I think the hardest thing a soldier, a young man of 19 years old, can ever see.