Alan Moskin
Oral History Transcript

Alan Moskin: It was May 4, 1945. We came across a RAF [Royal Air Force] camp, mostly was a concentration—it was a camp, not a concentration camp. It was a prisoner-of-war camp, POW camp, but [the prisoners were] mostly RAF—Royal Air Force, British flyboys.

Pretty good shape. They were thin, you know, obviously had been eating regularly or whatever, but very thankful to be liberated. And we heard from them the first time—men, we heard rumors that it's a camp for Jews a few kilometers away, down the road somewhere, rumors.

So, you know, you hear a lot of rumors. We weren't sure. We started to walk. It was a damp kind of a day, I remember the ground was still wet. It was in the forest area. And I remember all of a sudden and there was something... the most overpowering, nauseating stench. It was a stench that'd make you go, *What is that freakin' smell?*

We all looked at each other. It got into your nostrils. It, like, permeated through your body. It was... whew, kept getting worse and worse. And all of a sudden, we came across this, I guess you'd call it, like a compound, a big, you know—that turned out to be the Gunskirchen Lager, a subcamp of Mauthausen, it was a concentration camp in Austria.

There was very little resistance because the Nazis knew we were coming. It's near the end of the war, and they had run. We entered this camp, and as I've said so many times, it was the most horrific sight I've ever seen or ever hope to see for the rest of my life. I had seen combat and I'd seen dead bodies, but these were skeletal-like bodies all over the place, skeletal-like, on top of each other.

The stench I told you about. Those—the term I'm going to use is poor souls, because my Lieutenant, he kept saying, "Oh my God, look at these poor souls." He meant it affectionately. These poor souls—those poor souls that were alive were so emaciated, it defies description. I don't think any of them could have weighed more than 75 or 85 pounds.

I remember some, they were—if I close my eyes I can visualize: They were walking toward us like, looked like zombies. Their arms looked like broomsticks. They're like—bones covered with hardly any flesh. The cheeks were hollowed out, the eyes sunken back, and they all looked alike to me, you know, like I couldn't distinguish genitalia, age. They all looked alike to me.

The stench I told you about, they had sores on their bodies, a lot of them. The teeth were... what they had were discolored, some of them; the hair, very little. They were chanting prayers, I guess many of them, in dialects we couldn't understand. As I said, they had these what looked like pajamas, like striped or gray or whites, filthy rags on. We weren't prepared for this.

We didn't know what this was. I mean, these were civilians. I remember asking, "What is this? Who are you?" And then some of them would back up, like scared. My Lieutenant was smart enough to say, "They don't know who we are. There's some of the semi-delirious. They're not

sure.” And he knew. He said—he knew I was Jewish—“Moskin,” and I think there was one other Jewish kid, “can you speak Hebrew? German? Can you tell them we’re American soldiers? They're free. They're liberated. We're gonna feed them.”

My Captain kept screaming, and I remember being frustrated because I couldn't speak [Yiddish]. My grandparents and all, they came from the old country. Everybody spoke American. They wanted to learn English, so they don't want to speak it. They did in the bedroom, or whatever they did, but not when we were around. They would teach us English.

But I remember those Jewish idioms, like “meshugana,” that means crazy, or “chutzpah.” Idioms I knew, but to speak... So, I somehow was able to say, and this in German, I heard it somewhere, “Ich bin auch ein Jude.” That literally in German is “I am also a Jew.”

Just came out of me. I heard it somewhere. And to this day, I can't tell you where or what. And for the first time when I said that, some of them, you could see some smiles and cheer. They said, “Amerikaner, danke, danke.” That's, “Thank you. Thank you.” It was very emotional.

I remember this elderly gentleman coming toward me with a smile. I don't want to say it, but the smell, I tell you, it was so... they smelled so bad. But he went down on the ground and I'm looking at it visually, looking on the ground. *What’s he—?* And he started to, on his knees, started to kiss my boots. My boots were caked with feces and mud and blood, you know, marching in them.

And I knew he was trying to be affectionate toward me, it was very emotional. He was crying and thanking me, thanking me. But I never had anybody groveling at my feet, and I couldn't take it. And I’m picking him up under the armpits like this so that when he came up from—he was coming up backwards as I picked him up.

And again, I tell you, I don’t want to emphasize it, but the smell was so powerful, you wanted to get away from them. And then as I looked to the back of the nape of his neck, he had these open festering sores all the way down the back of his neck, you know.

And not only that—this is graphic, but I tell it like it happened—there was lice. They all had lice from the filth of the camps. These are these little crawling damn things. And they were crawling out of the, so you could see how vividly... Man, I wanted to pull away in the worst way. But he had his arms now, as he came up, he grabbed me around the arms and he was crying.

And then I felt his, I felt his tears. Like as he came up, he was crying and I felt it on my cheek here. And I started to cry—there was a lot of crying going on. I’m not embarrassed to say it, it was very emotional. And some of the others came over to me and shook my hand and some thanked me.

We went into the barracks. There were two layers of, as far as you could see, bunks or whatever you want to call them, huts. The people were dead, people on top of each other.

Everywhere you looked, everywhere you looked in the Gunskirchen Lager was the foul stench of the dead and the dying. Everywhere. Thousands. It's like trying to describe the indescribable.

That's all I can tell you. And it left a mark on me, in my heart, my soul. I kept saying over and over again later on, I couldn't understand how one group of people could do this to another group of people. These were civilians, these were not soldiers. I kept saying, “How did the civilized world”—I still say it today—“how did the civilized world let something like this happen? Why did this happen?”

This didn't happen overnight. I learned later these camps were going up for years in the ’30s and ’40s, and that's when I also got annoyed at our President when I heard later that they well knew these camps were there. And the ship of *St. Louis* with some of the survivors they didn’t allow to land, went back to Europe and they were murdered, most of them. That broke my heart.

It's, you know, it's still an unbelievable thing that I remember there, what happened, and when I see some of these people that survived that camp, I didn't see it for many years till I went on a group [tour] called the March of the Living years later, bunch of young students go over to Poland and Israel to visit some of the camps.

[They] also wanted me to go. Ten years ago, I did go. [It’s] not the same barbed wire, but you know the smell, the bodies. But I met a lady who said, “My father was in Gunskirchen. [He lives] up in Toronto, Canada. Mr. Moskin, please, you got to come up there and visit my father.”

So I went up there years ago and he was there, and then some other survivors from the camp lived up in Toronto. And it was very emotional, you know, to see people. Then she said something to me that I never thought about, she says, “You know, Alan, by liberating my father…” —and she always said, “You,” and I always corrected her and said, “Look, it was my outfit.” I always say, it wasn't a one man… We had a joke, “Oh no, I didn't do it all by myself.”

“But when you liberated my father, it wasn't just my father. You liberated his children, and I'm one of them, and our siblings and my children who are his grandchildren. And they're going to have children. They're going to be the great-grands.”

So she put it like—I think there's an expression of by liberating one, you liberate the world, or something to that effect. I never thought of it that way, but maybe there's some solace or truth to that, that there was more that every one of those people that survived.