

## **Soulas Transcription (A. Steevens)**

My experience in the nazi concentration camps of BUCHENWALD and LANGENSTEIN-ZWEIBERG

By Raymond A. Soulas

I am a national French Engineer, born in Paris, France on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918. My father was a medicine doctor in Paris. I married on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1942, Denise, the daughter of solicitor in a small city of Perigord, South west of France. We are still married today and we have three children, six grandchildren. Both of our families are of French ascendance[unclear] and Roman Catholics. We live now in Boulogne, near Paris.

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In August 1944, I was twenty-five and had been married for two years. We had a son, aged one year. Since the summer of 1943, I was employed as a junior engineer on the site of a hydroelectric scheme in the central mountains of France and lived with my family in a small town. I was a member of a "Resistance" organization built up by [unclear] former French Army Officers and had been in charge of recruiting volunteers, to be [unclear] mobilized after the landing of the allied troops, which happened in Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

I was now in command of a company stationed in the forests of that wild country, equipped with weapons we had received by parachutes, thanks to the British S.O.E., a member of which was staying with our staff. The men in my company were mostly young French boys, working on the site of the dam; some were Spanish refugees from the civil war; others were village people from the surroundings; a few were natives from Algeria or Morocco. Our aim was to stop, or at least, slow down the move of the German troops towards the battle front.

I was caught at Le Lioran, near the city of Aurillac, on August 13<sup>th</sup>, after three days of fighting against a Wehrmacht column. Six of my men were killed near me, and we were [too?] two taken as prisoners. We were not shot, mainly due to the fact that I was wearing a military uniform, spoke good German, and was able to argue with the commanding Colonel. But, after a priest of the nearby city of Murat had tried to arrange an exchange with the German prisoners, which was not accepted by the Wehrmacht, we were taken to a Gestapo prison in Clermont-Ferrand.

After a week there, we were sent to Germany, in a full train of captives from the "Resistance." One the way, I succeeded escaping from the wagon at night, but I was caught again and [unclear] imprisoned in Belfort, near the German border. On September 5<sup>th</sup>, I was included in another transport, with a bunch of fellow [unclear] prisoners. The trip lasted five days, with very little food and water to drink. [An addendum appears at the end of page 3] On September 10<sup>th</sup>, we arrived at Buchenwald.

At that time, that well-known camp was overcrowded by men deported from several European countries, but no work was possible, as the two weapons factories in Gustlov and Mibau had been destroyed by the Allied Air Force on August the 24<sup>th</sup>. Most of the captives were sent to satellite camps – the "Kommandos" – where works were being performed. [Unclear] I stayed in Buchenwald only two weeks in a "quarantine" and was sent, on September 25<sup>th</sup>, to the Kommando of Langenstein-Zweiberg, near the city of Halberstadt, at the edge of the Harz Mountains. This Kommando, which the S.S. called "Malachit" had been created in April of 1944, and was planned for the construction, and later the operation, of an underground

missile factory, to be run by the firm Junkers. The project included twelve kilometers of [unclear] galleries, with all [unclear] appurtenant works: roads, railway [unclear] trades, [unclear] pipings, *et cetera*.

The camp itself was situated on the slope of a wooded hill and surrounded by an electrified barbed wire fence, supervised by armed watchmen standing in miradors. The installation was poor, compared to Buchenwald, with wooden huts and very little sanitary facilities. It was planned to build a crematorium, at a later stage of the works, but priority was given to the construction of the underground factory.

When I arrived, the death [unclear] rate was not yet high and the corpses were sent to the Buchenwald crematorium. About four thousand men lived in the camp, according to the necessary labor force, as the S.S. had planned it, in agreement with the construction firms. The men came from seventeen countries, mainly from Poland, Russia, France, and Czechoslovakia. Only very few were Jews: some of the Poles and some of the other captives who had been arrested with false identities and had succeeded [in] concealing it. It did not make any difference to me whether a fellow was a Jew or not. What was important was to remain, as much as possible with other French captives, as well in the huts as in the working [unclear] teams.

A group of French priests and friars had been arrested as they were working as [unclear] of us, because of their religious [unclear] activities among French workers in Germany and they had been sent to Langenstein-Zwieberge via Buchenwald. They brought us spiritual support, [which was] very appreciated by most of us. Some of them were real Saints, praying for the salvation of our tormentors. Before Christmas, [unclear] of the priests were sent to Dachau where a special building had been assigned to them. There, they were allowed to celebrate masses, which was strictly forbidden in all other concentration camps.

Life in Langenstein-Zweiberg was very hard. We woke at 4:00 A.M. and there was a distribution of hot ersatz coffee, with nothing to eat. Then, we went down to the "Appleplatz", an open piece of land where all the captives assembled twice a day for being counted and constituting the working teams. It was a long ceremony, lasting more than one hour. The Kapos and the S.S. used to scream and, sometimes, to strike, if we were not in a good alignment, by rows of five. *Zu Fünf!* When the "Appel" was over, the teams left to [begin] their assigned work. We worked seven days a week, [in] two shifts, day or night, alternatively, changing every week. The duration of the shift was twelve hours.

[Like] most of the [other] captives, I worked mainly in the galleries and was employed to all types of unskilled labor works: loading [unclear] tip-treclas with rocks, pushing them on the narrow tracks, handling rails, bricks, and cement bags, *et cetera*.

The days and nights were long and dominated by hunger, as we had nothing to eat between the daily [and] evening soups. We were directed by foremen, the "Meister" employed by [the] contractors. These men, happy not to be on the battlefield, were brutal, screaming and often beating [us] if they thought we were not working hard enough. The private firms which employed them demanded an efficient performance, as the underground factory had to be completed quickly so that they [could] replace the open air plants, [that had been] destroyed by the Allied Air Force.

After twelve hours [of] work, we walked back to the back [which was about one mile] away, and [we] had to stand for one hour more on the “Appleplatz” before being allowed to go to our hut and receive our unique daily meal: a litre of clear vegetable soup, a piece of bread, and a stick of [unclear] margarine or a slice of ‘ersatz’ sausage.

As months went by, the soup [became] clearer and the piece of bread smaller. Hunger was our main concern, and we were becoming weaker, [too weak] to perform the hard work. An increasing number of men died from exhaustion, illness, or [unclear] because of the beatings by the Meister, the Kapos, or the S.S.

In December, the temperatures fell below zero and snow began falling. The long stays on the “Appleplatz” were terrible and every day men fell during the “Appels”, during the walks to the working site or back [unclear] on the working site itself. Some died on the spot and we had to carry their corpse back to the camp. Some did not die immediately and were carried to the “Revier”, the camp hospital. There, the doctors had very little drugs to cure them and, after a few days, many died. During the first months of 1945, mortality increased to several hundred men every month.

*[Transcription note: I am modifying sentence one, paragraph two, in page seven, to capture intent most-likely conveyed. Original sentence is: ‘The corpses was too many to be transported’]*

There were too many dead to transport all of the corpses to Buchenwald. Instead, the S.S. had them sent to the municipal crematorium of the nearby city of Quedlimburg. But, after some time, as the number of corpses still increased, the municipality refused to accept our dead comrades. The S.S. decided a collective grave was to be dug, just outside the barbed wire fence. The dead men were thrown into it at the rhythm of more than twenty per day.

New transports came from Buchenwald to replace the dead and keep the labor force at the required level for the completion of the works. In March of 1945, these transports included captives evacuated from the camps in Poland, such as Auschwitz, liberated by the [unclear] of the Russian Army. Many Jews were amongst them, [and they] came to work in the galleries.

At that time, I had become very weak and emaciated. I was lucky enough to be accepted in the “Revier” by a French doctor. There was a risk of catching dysentery, a disease of which many died. But I felt the risk was greater if I had to go on working. News from the battlefield [was] very encouraging and my spirits were high. I was decided to survive and rejoin my wife and son.

On April 9<sup>th</sup> in 1945, the S.S. assembled [three thousand men] on the “Appleplatz” who were in sufficiently good condition to participate in the evacuation of the camp. Six columns of five hundred [men] were formed. They left the camp at night, watched by the S.S. and their dogs, and walked towards the east. For several days, they walked every night, wandering between the American and Russian armies. Years later, I met French fellows who had participated in what has been called “the death march.” Those who could not follow were shot, as well as those who tried to escape and did not succeed. Only about one-third survived as the S.S. finally decided to run away and try to hide themselves, as the two Allied armies met on the Elbe at Torgau.

In the camp, fourteen hundred men were remaining. [These men] had been considered invalids. I was one of them. According to Himmler's orders, all of us should have been killed, as it happened, in some places, such as the Gardelegen barn.

But the S.S. who had been left to watch us were not fanatics. As they heard the battle come neared, they fled and left us alone. The first Allied troops [unclear] panned along the barbed wire fence on April 11<sup>th</sup>. They were the U.S. soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division of the 9<sup>th</sup> Army. Those of us who could walk went to the "Appleplatz" to greet them with tremendous joy: to us they meant life!

But war was going on and these fighters could not take care of us. On their way, they ordered villages from Langenstein to go to the camp [and to] bring us food and help. Many of the captives in the camp were dying from dysentery at every moment. Corpses were lying everywhere in the huts and the smell was [pestilent].

After two days, more U.S. troops came by, from the 39<sup>th</sup> Division. Major General [Maclain] visited the camp and was horrified by what he saw. U.S. soldiers, helped by German men, organized the burial of the dead and the care to be given to the living men. On April 16<sup>th</sup>, I was wandering in the camp, using a stick to walk. The sun was shining and I enjoyed being alive. But I worried about my family, guessing they did not know whether I was dead or not.

I accosted an American officer who was visiting the camp and offered to give my information. He was a correspondent of the Chicago Sun, John M. Mecklin. I showed him round and we discussed for a moment. Before he left, I gave him my father's address and phone number in Paris and asked if he would let him know he had seen me. So he did and it was the first time in eight months that my family had any news. My wife had lived in anxiety for all of that time. Mr. Mecklin's letter brought her relief and hope.

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, several ambulances of the U.S. Army arrived to the camp and began evacuating us to a field hospital installed [within] the former S.S. barracks in Halberstadt. The most disabled men were carried on stretchers. I left the next day, with great satisfaction, the place of my tormentors. When arriving in the yard of the barracks, my dirty striped convict clothes, soiled with excrements, were taken and burnt in a fire. I had a shower, a shave, and a spray of disinfectant product. Now clean, I received a nice [pair of] pajamas with two mysterious letters embroidered on the collar: G.I. Only the next day, a nurse gave me the meaning of this inscription and I knew what a G.I. was! Nicely dressed, I was led to a room and invited to rest in a camp bed with clean white sheets. This was my return to the civilized world!

I admired how the U.S. Army had so quickly set up the hospital for caring [for] hundreds of unexpected clients. A doctor examined me. He did not find any severe illnesses but cachexia, [unclear] arthritis, and emaciation. My weight was thirty-five kilograms, almost half of my normal weight. Many of my companions were in much worse condition. In spite of the very good care they received, more than one hundred died, out of the three hundred and fifty who had been transported there.

I received an adapted diet, with several light meals, and adequate medication. After a few days I felt better and [was] longing to go back home. I had made good friends with the nurses and attendants in charge of the hospital and I tried to help with their relations with the former captives. The Russians and [Polish captives], who had spent several years in camps

and did not even know, in their countries, the [unclear] new American food we received, jostled [with] each other at every distribution, as they used to in the camps. Besides, they did not understand the explanations given in English by the staff. I translated these into German and explained there was plenty of food for everyone. That brought quietness amongst my companions and relieved the attendants.

I asked one of them, Mr. Paul L. Dayton, if he would send a letter to my family, as I was still worried about their information on my condition. He nicely wrote a letter, mentioning my son's second birthday, which was about to be celebrated on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. This again, brought hope to my wife and to the other members of my family.

On April 29<sup>th</sup>, the doctors judged I was well enough to return home. I left my American friends, thanking them for their good cares and friendship. I was transported, with some other deported fellows, to Halberstadt railway station, and from there, to Paris by train. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, we arrived at [unclear] *gau du Nord*. At the welcome center, my father came to greet me with my cousin, who had been fighting in the Free French Commandos and had landed in Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944. They took me to my father's house, where my beloved wife and my son were expecting me. You can imagine how great was joy to be together again. For me, it was the end of a long nightmare.

A majority of the seven thousand captives who came to Langenstein-Zweiberg during the eleven months after the creation of the camp were not as lucky as I was to survive and rejoin their country and their family. About five thousand of them died from accidents, illness, malnutrition, severe beatings, hanged by the S.S. after an unsuccessful escape during the final "death march."

After the war, anti-nazi Germany built a monument above the collective grave where too many of our fellow slaves are buried. The names of all the countries whose nationals died in the camp are inscribed there. Flowers are regularly laid by the care of an Association assembling citizens of Langenstein and Halberstadt with survivors of different nationalities.

Every year, on the anniversary of the liberation by the U.S. troops, some of us meet there to celebrate the memory of our dead comrades and to express the wish that such horrors do not happen again.

Raymond A. Soulaas  
August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1995.

### **Footnotes**

Transcription performed manually by Adam Steevens on 4/2/2021. Barring any of my errata, the text here reflects what is written in the original document. Any words encountered during transcription that are not immediately clear are marked with [unclear] in brackets in conjunction with my best approximation of the original word used. For the ease of the reader, I have removed parenthetical punctuation present in the original manuscript, as well as removing all upper-case words, usually those carrying geographical significance, and I have added commas, hyphens, prepositions, paragraph breaks, and capitalization where I believe they are appropriate. I have reserved integers in text for dates, times,

enumeration of military units, and transcribed other numerals in a consistent manner. All acronyms apart from those belonging to military units have been changed (ex. 'KM' to 'kilometer')