

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

PHILIP DI GIORGIO

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: December 6, 1994

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Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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PG - Philip DiGiorgio [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: December 6, 1994

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Philip Solomon, interviewing Mr. Philip DiGiorgio for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Mr. DiGiorgio is a veteran, U.S. Army Veteran, of World War II, and was involved in liberation of concentration camps. Today's date is December 6, 1994. Mr. DiGiorgio, can you tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving?

PG: I was with the 42nd Rainbow Division of the 7th Army and...

PS: That was an infantry division?

PG: Right. And I was in E Company of the 232nd Regiment of the 42nd Division. I am a proud holder of the Combat Infantrymen's Badge, and I'm sitting here today to tell you that it was my honor to liberate Dachau concentration camp, having been in the first wave. And the sights, of course, were unbelievable.

PS: Going back a little bit before you discovered the concentration camp, in your advance through France, do you know where in France you landed, on the continent of Europe?

PG: We came in on, in Marseilles, the port of Marseilles. And we took the forty and eight trains¹ to Strasbourg. And then it was from Strasbourg that we went into action. We hit, well many, many towns, many of which are familiar, like Nuremberg, Würzburg, Schweinfurt, Fürth, and also the Vosges mountains. We started out at Gemsheim in Jan-...

PS: Now that was all in combat, right?

PG: Yes. They were all, we, our division took all those towns. Then on occasion, like in Munich, I believe your outfit helped out. We had the 45th Division and the 101st to help us out. It was a real, real tough battle. But--and then, after that we hit Dachau. And I guess it was about two weeks later the war ended, thank God.

PS: Again, now in your advance, like when you went through France, did you see any evidence of Nazi atrocities? Like did you see any displaced person camps or prisoner of war camps?

PG: No. No, we...

PS: Did you have...

PG: ...we had a job to do. We were going--it was about the time, Phil, of the Bulge.

PS: December...

PG: That was the beginning.

PS: ...December, 1944.

¹ Trains designated to carry forty people or eight horses.

PG: That was the beginning of it. And it was during the time, yeah...

PS: So in France you had no contact with French citizens or you saw no...

PG: I...

PS: You were not in a position to see any evidence...

PG: No, no, no.

PS: That the Ge-, yeah.

PG: We when we ended up, when we landed in Strasbourg, the Alsace-Lorraine people were very friendly, very helpful. That was I think the last time I slept in a bed. And then we went off and I was like a dog. I didn't...

PS: Now was Strasbourg still in...

PG: I shouldn't say that.

PS: Alsace...

PG: Alsace-Lorraine.

PS: Yeah.

PG: And we--from there we pushed off and we had--we lived in January, February, March, April, outdoors and, like an animal.

PS: Yeah.

PG: But thanking God that I made it. And I say--but Dachau, the concentration camp, was unbelievable, to see man's inhumanity to man...

PS: Yeah.

PG: ...was staggering.

PS: Just one question, Phil, before we get to Dachau. You were--you entered Germany in March was that? February or March, 1945, right?

PG: No, no.

PS: The Bulge was December, 1944. Then...

PG: The Bulge, well it was like the end of, I think it was the end of December.

PS: Yeah.

PG: In December it was.

PS: Yeah.

PG: That's when we hit Strasbourg.

PS: Yeah. Well what I wanted to ask you, Phil, after you entered Germany and you advanced in combat, say for the next couple weeks, were you in any way aware of what was going on within Germany? Were you aware then of the gassing of all the Jews, of political prisoners, the Romanians, the Poles? Were you aware at all of what later became known as the Holocaust?

PG: Yes. I, we used to get our hands on *The Stars and Stripes*, the paper. That's how I knew about the atrocities. And like I said, going through all the towns we went, we fought in, and ending up in Dachau, was, well, it was a staggering thing to see. Like--I've given you some of my pictures of the atrocities. It was breathtaking and unbelievable. Like I'll say it again, man's inhumanity to man was unbelievable.

PS: Now, before you reached the site of the concentration camp, you were in combat against the German Army, the *Wehrmacht*, and the SS for a couple months I guess, when, until you arrived...

PG: January, February, March and [unclear] ended up...

PS: Yeah.

PG: ...in May the 9th.

PS: Now during that period, again, did you see any, did you liberate any displaced persons camps, any prisoner of war camps?

PG: Just Dachau. That's the only...

PS: Yeah.

PG: But that's the only one we hit. But we were, you know, we were following orders and we went where we were told to go. We hit, like I say, the major towns that I mentioned.

PS: When you were approaching the concentration camp of Dachau, did you know, were you, do you know if your command knew that they were, was there any part of your mission to liberate Dachau? Do you think that any of your men, including your command element, knew that they were on their way to liberate a concentration camp?

PG: Yes, yes, we were not told that. They knew it. They, in other words, we just, you know, go where they point us.

PS: Yeah.

PG: But...

PS: Do you think that they were aware to get to Dachau...

PG: Oh yeah.

PS: For the purpose of...

PG: Oh yeah, yeah. The high command designated our company to hit that concentration camp. And I think the greatest sight I ever saw in Dachau were the bodies of about eight SS soldiers with their heads blown off. I found that a very enjoyable sight. I know it sounds cruel. And the other sight is, was having the pleasure of seeing the prisoners grab a guard who mixed in. When they were running around, when they were released from their cells, and the gates were opened, some of the guards tried to escape mingling with the prisoners. The prisoners--it was another great sight where, I know I was pretty bitter at the time after seeing all this, the unbelievable sights, that they would grab the guards and rip them apart. I mean, pull them apart handily, without any instruments, just their pain and their horror was such that they had to, they relieved a lot of their tension by doing that. But it was a sight to behold. And I do remember taking some of the building, opening up--well we had to clear a lot of the buildings in the camp to make sure there weren't any pockets or anybody hiding, and we would see people sitting up on a chair that were white as a ghost. They were dead, but they were still alive, and they could hardly move. It was the most frightening sight. And then when I visited one of the *Kommandant's* offices I did see the first time a lampshade made out of human skin.

PS: Phil, not to interrupt, when you, now we're speaking about Dachau. And we're talking of the date of about April 29th, 1945.

PG: Mmm hmm.

PS: When you first entered, was there any armed resistance from...

PG: No.

PS: ...the guards?

PG: There, the Germans had fled. Those people that were in the camp fled. And like I said they did, we did catch, my platoon didn't do it, but another platoon, the 1st Platoon, caught these SSers that I saw lying on the ground. But they were the only soldiers that were left. And of course there were guards around. I don't know whether they were civilians or what, but they had mingled in with the prisoners that, they got there just to, I guess, as I explained.

PS: Yeah.

PG: But, well, we pressed on. I guess we were there a better part of a day then we pressed on, because we were still chasing them.

PS: Can you give any estimate at all of the number of dead that were around the camp or also the number of living?

PG: I cannot give you the amount of people that we liberated, but there was a hell of a lot of them. But there were about, from what I've read, about 60,000 people that were cremated in Dachau, according to, from what I've read.

PS: Yeah, according to the records.

PG: Yeah, 60,000 human beings. And...

PS: Now among the survivors, first were there any children?

PG: I did not see any children. But I know there were lots of children in photographs that I've seen and pictures I've seen and having been so close to it, seeing other camps, that there were a lot of children. I might have, I do have the privilege of going there in the coming April, to visit Dachau and to also look at the Rainbow Division Memorial Plaque at the main gate. We have our Rainbow Division plaque there, which I'd be very proud to see, although I doubt we are going. Its next year, our 50th Anniversary.

PS: Can you kind of give a description of the condition most of the survivors that you saw? Were there many women?

PG: Yeah. There were men and women.

PS: Women, but no children.

PG: There were men and women. I did not see any children. Men and women. They were naturally underfed. They were, they looked very ragged, naturally. But it was a great joy and exhilaration for them to see us. That I remember.

PS: Did you see any freight cars, cattle cars, the forty and eights?

PG: Yes. As we approached the gates, on the outside, let alone the bodies we saw inside, there were about I'd say fifteen to twenty of these little freight trains. They called them forty and eights: forty people or eight horses. And they had them stacked with

bodies, ready to be cremated. They were still outside the gate. They had so many in there that they had these freight trains parked, freight cars parked outside. And that was the first thing that I saw that was absolutely staggering. Absolutely.

PS: They were like railroad cattle cars, were forty and eights.

PG: And they were piled there just like piles of wood or trash, just unbelievable, Phil.

PS: Was there, do you think that, from what you, oh, was there any--did you have any contact at all with the prisoners? Were any of them able to speak English or were any of them--were you or any of your buddies that were...

PG: I had two fellows, one fellow from Rydal, Vic Shafer, and another one from Long Island, Lenny Russin, that were able to speak Jewish. And they did communicate with some of them. But we had a job to do. And though we spoke with, they spoke with them a short while, we were in a machine gun squad and we kept moving. We had a thing to do. We, you know, there was no time for--but I do remember that.

PS: You did have time to observe a number of the survivors, right?

PG: Mmm hmm.

PS: Did you have any indication [unclear] nationality? In other words, do you think it was predominantly Poles or Romanians or Gypsies or Jews?

PG: It's very difficult to say. I imagine, well, I don't imagine, but most of them were of Jewish extraction, whereas a lot of Poles and German Jews, Polish Jews, and, they were most of them that I surmised.

PS: Phil, when you entered the camp, you say there were no guards still remaining there?

PG: They were, no, they were--the soldiers left. There were some of the guards now. I am pretty sure they were civilian guards because at that time toward the end of the war the German Army was hurting and they were surrendering all over the place. There were as many as 200,000 surrendered at one time. And men were kicking them in the rear end as they surrendered. And that's what I remember.

PS: Yeah. Do you have any--was your medical unit with you? Were they prepared to treat those who were in need of medical treatment?

PG: Yes, there were some, I remember that. But the ones that I saw, you know, they were running around in jubilation. I mean, having been sprung, you know, they, there was just, a lot of chaos, you know?

PS: Did your unit, were they prepared to feed the...

PG: I don't, I can't tell you that.

PS: Yeah.

PG: I don't know. All I know is we were moving. At that time, Phil, you know, when you're on the line, there are no clean sheets and hot food. You got K-rations.

PS: Yes.

PG: Well, you know what a K-ration is.

PS: I'll say.

PG: Like a Cracker Jack box and you got a breakfast, lunch and dinner. And that was it. So, as far as, we weren't prepared. There were, probably the rear echelon probably came up and helped them, I imagine. We had to move on. After we cleared the camp then we had to move on. We had a job to do.

PS: It was quite possible that many of those you saw who were in pretty bad condition possibly many of them died also there.

PG: Oh, I have, like I said, this one building we were clearing, I remember there was these two people sitting. They were as white as a ghost and they were dead, but they were still alive. I could see their eyeballs moving. But they were absolutely, they were in solitary confinement, whatever their problem, whatever they did. And it was something you never forget.

PS: Yeah. Is there any--we have more--some other things to travel, Phil, but within, while, during the time you did spend within the concentration camp, is there anything additional you would like to mention in addition to what we've already gone through?

PG: No, just that prior to hitting Dachau, and having been in the field for I'd say about four months or five months, whatever it was, I became toward the end very bitter, losing a lot of friends, having seen all that I had seen. I was very, very tired and disgusted. But when I hit Dachau, I knew why the hell I was there in Europe. And I was glad that I could be part of it because the people in that camp could have been my friends and my relatives, my family. And that's how I look at things. And I was just happy that I had that honor of doing that.

PS: When you mention losing some of your friends, you're referring to buddies in your outfit...

PG: Yeah.

PS: ...who were, who didn't make it.

PG: Yeah. The first time we went in, in Gemsheim, oh, we lost a bundle. And we were told that we were gonna go in and clean out Gemsheim with nobody there and they were waiting for us with the Tiger Tanks. They really hammered us. That was our first taste. And, it was the beginning, yeah.

PS: I would like to add at this point that the 42nd Infantry Division, the Rainbow Division, was a very much honored unit during World War II.

PG: And World War I.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

PG: In World War I there was the Fighting 69 that everybody knows about. We were the same division, trying to maintain the division's valor.

PS: You--I was going to ask you about seeing all the horrible, almost unbelievable situations of the German atrocity against mankind, you did express that you were disgusted with the war and--but then you did mention that when you saw the

unbelievable sights of man's inhumanity to man in Dachau that you then saw that this was something that had to be?

PG: When I hit Dachau and saw what I saw, I, it just renewed my strength and my desire to fight, because like I said, at that time, you know, you're losing this buddy and that buddy. And this guy gets hit and that guy gets hit. And you're gonna wonder whether the next one's got your name on it. And you live like that for four, five months. But like I said, when I hit Dachau, when I saw that camp, that really, all I can say is, wow, you know?

PS: Phil, I think you had mentioned sometime back on this tape that you saw eight SS Germ-, in SS uniform, with their heads blown off?

PG: Mmm.

PS: Do you know what had happened to them, how it came about?

PG: I don't know. I saw them lying there. What had happened was, our 1st Platoon went in first and they probably apprehended them before we got there. But when we got in, we opened up the gates. But the 1st Platoon was pursuing. And after we regrouped we got out. But we had, like I said, we had to clear the camp before we went ahead. And there were a lot of tricky tunnels and a lot of--it was pretty scary, you know? You, like you're, you go through, you figure this is all clear, okay, there's nobody here. And then you, you're getting shot from behind. But there were a lot of tricky tunnels and stuff like that along the way.

PS: While you were right there in the, either in, within the camp or in the vicinity of Dachau, did you see any German civilians who were observing what had happened there?

PG: I saw a lot of displaced people. I've seen them like, you go into a town, like we went into Gemsheim, you see all the old people coming out and kids and the, with their animals and pets. It was just scary, you know, it was just heart, heart-, what am I trying to say?

PS: Yeah...

PG: Rendering. And I remember that sight. And the, well, that's the answer.

PS: Now, you expressed very well your own feelings. Do you think that your feelings represented pretty much the reactions of other men in your unit?

PG: Oh definitely, yeah, definitely.

PS: Now how long did you remain within Dachau?

PG: I'd say the major part of a day, then we had to move on.

PS: Yeah. When you moved on, at that point, what was your direction?

PG: We were in the 7th Army and we were--what we were doing, we were cleaning out pockets of Germans. And at that point there was, I would say during the past, that last week there wasn't that much resistance. They were only giving up. We had scores of them giving up.

PS: Now Phil, at this point, were you aware that this was Dachau, that this was a concentration camp? Did you think, even in your wildest imagination, that this was just

one of many concentration camps, that those, all the bodies you saw there, were only a part of twelve million that were killed? In other words, did you at that point realize that this all added up to twelve million killed in concentration camps?

PG: Well, I was aware. As I said, I read *The Stars and Stripes* about these concentration camps. And we had no idea where we were going when we were forging ahead. We were following orders from the high command of the 7th Army. And this is when we came into Dachau. And I saw, like I saw with my own eyes. But we were pretty busy most of the time. And we, dodging bullets, you know. It was an experience I don't know, are you, are we almost terminated now?

PS: Well, there are a few more things to...

PG: Go ahead.

PS: Now, in your own mind, Philip, can you explain the German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

PG: I knew, from what I had read, that the Nazis were the ones behind all the problems. After the war was over I was stationed in Austria for a year and I found the Austrian people very, very friendly, very nice. But where I was stationed, the--I went to church, I became very, very religious, Philip. I became very, very religious after the, you know, having survived what I did. And I went to church. I prayed, and the people in the town, this little town of Bad Hofgastein would see me going to church. And they'd, they were, you know, more friendly to me. And that's where I learned to speak German there. And I found the people very nice. I found from my experiences, there were an awful lot of hard core Nazis which, you can't wish them anything but bad luck. I mean, but I was fortunate to run into a lot of fine, fine people in Austria.

PS: I was going to ask you if your experiences had any effect at all in your faith and your religion. But I think you've already expressed that very, very well.

PG: Indubitably.

PS: That it did really have an effect.

PG: And to this day I you know, when you're in combat like that, you make all kind of promises to God. I'll be honest with you, Phil, I was so close to God I was on the other side of Him.

PS: Yeah.

PG: You know what I mean? Trust me. And...

PS: That's certainly very commendable. Is there a regimental history of your unit in combat? And the experience of the liberation?

PG: I don't get the question.

PS: You have a regimental history that shows...

PG: Well, we, yeah, we have I have articles, you know, from the certain towns that we took, like the Nuremberg and the Würzburg and the Munich, Gernsheim.

PS: Now, when you left Dachau, you proceeded what, south?

PG: Yeah.

PS: To Munich?

PG: I think it was, yeah, right before the end of the war.

PS: Yeah. We're up to, let's see this April 30th. And the official German surrender was May the 8th. So we're within...

PG: May the 9th, wasn't it?

PS: The 8th, 9th.

PG: Okay, I won't argue.

PS: Yeah, so we're within the last, final days of World War II. Now, as you advanced south of Munich toward Austria...

PG: Yeah.

PS: ...did you then see any other survivors of the concentration camps?

PG: There were a lot of displaced people, yeah. We saw them all the time. In fact, when we held up, after the war, we had a lot of them working for us. And they were in the towns doing, you know, menial jobs for the Germans, to keep occupied.

PS: Yeah.

PG: But they were all displaced people, lots of them, of different nationalities.

PS: Do you think they were accep--when they came in to--I know a lot of the displaced people simply wandered out of the concentration camps. You know, the survivors. And do you think they were accepted if they went into a small town, or, say Munich?

PG: I don't know about Munich, because that was behind us. But in Austria, I do remember seeing a lot of them, and they were gainfully employed, doing, of course, menial jobs. But, like I say, I found the people in Austria to be very nice. I was led to believe, I'm not a historian, I was led to believe that in northern Germany, was the hotbed of most of the Nazis. But I do know where I was stationed, thank God, that the people were very nice. And I didn't run across any, and it was a good thing I didn't run across any.

PS: Where were you at the time of the German surrender, which was either May 8th or 9th.

PG: I think it was Tittmoning in Germany.

PS: You hadn't yet reached Austria?

PG: Oh no, no, no, no.

PS: You were in...

PG: Oh wait a minute. I'm not sure now. You know it's only...

PS: Yeah, of course.

PG: It's only fifty years ago, Phil! It's only fifty years ago. I think we ended up there in Austria, in Salzburg, around in that area.

PS: Now, how long did you remain in Europe after the termination of the war? I believe you said about a year?

PG: About a year, because we spent most of the summer chasing *Fräuleins*, and then I learned to ski. I was in the ski resort. Oh, it was the most delightful winter. And I

got myself a good racket. I was the company clerk and I had some people who was doing my job. And I skied every day, Phil. It was the--it was a pleasure.

PS: Your unit then, was it still part of the 42nd...

PG: Oh yeah.

PS: ...division?

PG: Yeah. What happened was I was the clerk typist. And I tried to tell them that when I got drafted. And when I was in the machine gun squad I was very unhappy.

Tape one, side two:

PS: This is Phil Solomon on tape one, side two, interviewing Mr. Philip DiGiorgio for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Phil, you were just-- we were speaking about your post-war experiences in Austria as part, you were part, your outfit the 42nd was officially part of the Army of Occupation?

PG: Yes. Yeah, we were designated.

PS: Yeah. And you were staying in, again, what town in Austria?

PG: Bad Hofgastein. I was in the regimental headquarters. And that's where we were stationed.

PS: Yeah, the location, Phil, was it west of Vienna?

PG: It was near. It was, oh, it was directly east, it was near Salzburg.

PS: Yeah.

PG: Which was east of, Vienna was on the other side of Austria. And I...

PS: Yeah. You were west of...

PG: Yeah. And I'll tell you something. I had a chance to go visit Vienna. And I refused to go. Some of the fellows that came back from my company who were there said that the Russians were walking around with machine guns, full of vodka. And all I needed was one of those guys to bump into me and I wouldn't have come home. Because I was in no mood to--well anyhow, that's something else. But I never saw Vienna for that reason. But I did spend a lot of time in Salzburg, too.

PS: Yeah. Were you anywhere near Mauthausen, the concentration camp?

PG: No.

PS: That was I think about eighty miles west of Vienna.

PG: I'm not sure.

PS: One of the real bad ones. You know, one of the bad concentration camps. Now a few more questions, Phil. During this period, were you a witness to, what--I'd like to get if possible, a little picture of the handling of all these displaced persons, the concentration camp survivors, who were free and returning to their prior environment. Did you see any of the handling of these people?

PG: No, no. Because we had to push on, Phil.

PS: No, I mean...

PG: I'm sure that regimental headquarters and the rear echelon and, you know, for every person like myself in the infantry up on the line, there's about forty guys behind the line.

PS: Yeah, sure.

PG: And I was one of the lucky ones to be able to experience this. Ha, ha, ha! But, I'm sure they were handled, and I'm sure that the divisional and the 7th Army had made preparations and all, because a lot of them went on their own, too, you know. They couldn't force them to do anything.

PS: And were you aware of any, the assistance set up for handling these freed survivors, in getting them back to their homes or...

PG: I had, no. I had no idea. Like I said, we had to push on. I would love to have hung around and not push on.

PS: But you were...

PG: I don't know. I do not know how it was handled or what the procedure was for those people. But I was assured that they were taken care of.

PS: Yeah. Now you remained in Europe then until about May of 1946? Or...

PG: Yeah. I got out in '46. I guess it was around May.

PS: Just reminiscing, thinking back, did you, do you think that you would have the same feelings about the war had you not seen the concentration camp?

PG: Oh that was, like I had mentioned earlier, I--what am I--you know, everybody's waiting--my number's gonna come up, you know. I figured, well. But when I hit Dachau and I felt I accomplished something, I did something, and it was a very warm feeling knowing what these poor people went through in concentration camps, poor innocent people.

PS: Yes. So you believe, as most of us, that our war effort was justified through all the atrocities that...

PG: Well, that animal wanted to come over here. You know, he was...

PS: Yeah, sure, would have.

PG: He, oh, definitely. He was on his way. And he had, he was a very ambitious paper hanger. And I'm just delighted, like I said, that he met his demise.

PS: Yeah. Phil, I have covered just about the field that, you know, the questions about what we would like to, you gave us exactly the testimony that an eyewitness to the Holocaust. Is there anything that you would want to add? Anything that we didn't cover that you would like to add at this point?

PG: No, just that I'm delighted that you called on me to help. This Holocaust museum is very important, because there are a lot of people that don't realize and are very callous towards this. And it just, it aggravates me, and I'm glad I could put my name to this, because like I say, there are a lot of people that don't even believe it, unfortunately. And I'm just glad I can attest to my experience. I will say this, the United States Post Office is trying to come out with a stamp depicting the atom bomb. And...

PS: [unclear]

PG: There's a lot of...

PS: The Japanese are objecting very strenuously.

PG: Yes. Now let me say something about this. Now this is important. I found out about a month after the war that we were getting ready to go to Japan. Well, you can imagine how I felt. I was, thank God, I came through one. I gotta go over there and let them, you know, take a shot at me?

PS: Yeah.

PG: Well God bless him, the President of the United States...

PS: Yeah.

PG: ...Harry Truman, dropped the bomb and ended the war. Now, of course, a lot of people were killed. It was a terrible thing. But, he saved a lot of their lives, too.

PS: Yeah, that's exactly...

PG: He saved a lot of their lives, but he saved my life. And I--never--the greatest man that ever lived...

PS: Yeah.

PG: He saved my life. And...

PS: I...

PG: When I hear this, that we want to defend them--they started the war, Philip! They, and like I say, I'm not a hero. I didn't volunteer. Although I got my combat infantry badge and I got my Bronze Star. So those are my trophies.

PS: Yeah. Well deserved.

PG: Well, thank you.

PS: Phil, on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College, I want to thank you very, very much for your very meaningful testimony. And again, on behalf of all of us here at the Holocaust Archive, we thank you very, very much.

PG: Okay.