

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

AL GROSS

Interviewer:	Philip G. Solomon
Date:	May 4, 1990

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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AG - Al Gross [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: May 4, 1990

Tape one, side one:

PS: I'm interviewing Mr. Al Gross for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is May 4, 1990. Al, where in Europe and in what unit were you serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

AG: I was with the 42nd Division, Division Artillery, in the Reserve, as a task force with the 45th and the 3rd Division Artillery [unclear].

PS: And that was part of which army?

AG: The 7th Army, General Patch's¹.

PS: You entered Europe through France or...

AG: Through France.

PS: And...

AG: We came up from Italy into France actually.

PS: Yeah. You served then prior to Eur-, prior to the, you served in Italy prior to...

AG: No, well, we landed in Italy.

PS: Yeah.

AG: We came up in Italy there.

PS: Right. Now when you entered France, and before you actually entered Germany, did you see anything at all of atrocities on the part of the Germans against civilians or military personnel?

AG: No, not, no, I didn't.

PS: When you entered Germany, well, had you heard prior to your arrival and your sight of the first atrocity, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews in Europe?

AG: Yes, I had heard of it.

PS: At that time had you seen any evidence at all of Nazi atrocities in Europe, like the DP camps, prisoners of war camps...

AG: Yes, I saw some of the DP camps and some of the prisoner of war camps.

PS: In those camps, Al, did you hear, did you observe what you would consider to be very, very bad treatment, say on the PW camps, would you say that they adhered fairly well to the Geneva Convention, the standards, or...

AG: From what I saw I wouldn't believe it.

¹Patch, Alexander McCarrell, commander of the U.S. 7th Army since March 1, 1944, after General Patton.

PS: The condition of the prisoners?
AG: The prisoners were not taken care of well.
PS: And these were in prisoner of war camps.
AG: Yeah.
PS: Can you perhaps describe a bit their physical condition and mental condition?
AG: To be honest with you I couldn't...
PS: It was, you would say it was very bad.
AG: It was ver-, the conditions were not good.
PS: And you would say that the condition of these prisoners would, would indicate to you that the Germans were not adhering to the standards of treatment.
AG: Of treatment, yes, which I didn't know too much about what the treatment should be but I didn't think it was very humane.
PS: Now, when you arrived, when you and your unit advanced into Germany itself and you were fighting within Germany, prior to your being witness to one of the concentration camps, did you then, were you then aware of the fact that they were operating gas chambers?
AG: Yes, after we got into them, and at that time.
PS: Yeah. But prior to that...
AG: No, I had no, I had heard but...
PS: Yeah.
AG: I didn't know.
PS: Can you, Al, give me the name of the concentration camp you liberated and its location?
AG: It was in Dachau. It's right outside of München, in Munich, Germany.
PS: Approximately the date that you arrived at Dachau?
AG: It was somewhere in early May, May 1st around, May 1st, 2nd [1944]...
PS: Yeah.
AG: Somewhere in that area.
PS: It was right then, and the date of the total German surrender was May 8th, so this was just really less than a week before the end of the war itself...
AG: ...end of the war.
PS: The date you think then was either late April or very early March.
AG: No, May.
PS: The-- I said March. I meant to say May.
AG: [chuckles]
PS: To the best of your memory, can you describe what you saw and what you felt at the time?

AG: Well, I felt a great deal of anger when I saw it there. And saw these piles of bodies laying in the [unclear] to be swept up and dumped in the large graves. And that, they used a bulldozer to shovel them in. And we saw these dogs that they had used, a lot of them were killed, you know, they had shot and killed over there. And these SS troops that were guarding the camp there and all. See, I saw a major handed one of the inmates there his gun to shoot 'em, which I-- this is a man you'd never believe he'd done anything, that anything like that could happen.

PS: You mean to shoot one of the SS..

AG: SS, right.

PS: Yeah, I was just gonna ask you, Al, when you entered, you and your unit entered Dachau, was it defended at all by the Wehrmacht or...

AG: No...

PS: SS?

AG: This, there was very little defense there. They were run-, just taking off.

PS: Did you-- were there many guards still remaining in the camp?

AG: Not too many, there were not too many.

PS: And probably their fate was not...

AG: Not...

PS: Too good.

AG: Too good.

PS: You say you saw many, many bodies...

AG: And...

PS: It was hundreds? Thousands? Would...

AG: Thousands I would say.

PS: Thousands. The...

AG: And they were piled high.

PS: From the condi-...

AG: Like sacks of potatoes there. In fact I think I have some pictures of all of it.

PS: Yeah. From the condition of the bodies, would you say that most of them...

AG: They were starved.

PS: Just starved. I was going to ask you that. Any evidence of any other cause of death like shootings or gassing or...

AG: Well, there was the dogs I imagine some of it was because I guess if they tried to escape or do something I mean...

PS: Yeah.

AG: But, basically it was...

PS: Can you...

AG: We didn't pay much attention to, you know, what it was. But you could see there was emaciated bodies in there.

PS: Yeah.

AG: Even the survivors over there.

PS: Can you...

AG: And the bunks inside there what they, how they slept in...

PS: There were still some living survivors...

AG: Oh yeah.

PS: Within...

AG: Yes.

PS: Can you estimate how many prisoners there were alive at that point?

AG: Off-hand I couldn't, no.

PS: But there were a considerable number that you saw.

AG: That I saw.

PS: And they were, and how would you describe their condition?

AG: Very poor condition, very poor condition.

PS: Do you know if you, your outfit was able to save any that, say, were near death at that time?

AG: To be honest with you I couldn't tell you.

PS: Do you know if this particular camp, Dachau, was set up for Jews only or was it a mixed camp?

AG: To be honest with you I don't know.

PS: And you have no way of estimating the nationalities, giving a guess as to the nationalities that were there?

AG: No, no, I have no way to know. We didn't do any interviewing at all. I was in and out of there in a short period of time, with our group. And...

PS: Yeah.

AG: Others came in after us.

PS: Did you see any children among the...

AG: There were some...

PS: Dead or living?

AG: There were some, there were both ways. I saw...

PS: Both...

AG: Dead and living.

PS: Both dead children and...

AG: Yeah, and living children.

PS: Alive. Was your unit prepared in any way to give them aid or comfort--that is, the living--to feed them or give them...?

AG: Our, our unit was not prepared for anything like that.

PS: No.

AG: Our, our unit was an obser-, air observation unit...

PS: Yeah.

AG: The, which makes the direct fire from the air. And we just happened to be there at the time and...

PS: Can you describe the reactions of the prisoners as you saw them, as you entered the camp?

AG: They, they were in joy, and very happy.

PS: Yeah. And there were a few guards still left in...

AG: There was a few guards still left and...

PS: Can you describe the behavior of the guards when the American troops appeared?

AG: To be honest with you I couldn't.

PS: Yeah. Were they in the hands of the prisoners at that time? Had the prisoners...

AG: A lot of them were...

PS: Taken over?

AG: Had taken over. Yeah, because there was not that many left.

PS: And you were an advance, an advance party then.

AG: Well...

PS: Yeah. I imagine, well, were you aware of whether or not units in the rear were advised of what was happening there?

AG: I, I, I have no, I have no idea.

PS: And you say you were not in the prison, in the concentration camp very long.

AG: No, we weren't in there long.

PS: You had a miss-, a military mission...

AG: We went in...

PS: And...

AG: We were there a day or so and then...

PS: Oh you were there a full day?

AG: Not even a full day.

PS: Yeah.

AG: It was a few hours and we went out.

PS: And when you left Dachau, you proceeded in what direction?

AG: If I recall correctly, we went back to our, you know, air base...

PS: Yeah.

AG: ...where we were, which is right outside of Dachau...

PS: ...oh, you were operating out of...

AG: Yeah, it was [unclear].

PS: Yeah.

AG: We were there.

PS: Were you flying personnel?

AG: Huh? No, I was ground personnel.

PS: Oh. Did the experience of seeing this have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

AG: Oh, it, it had a great deal to do with it. The fact that the USA had-- [unclear] could always call me a proper patriot. But as I say, I went in when I was 18 and like I say, news that I heard through my grandfather who was active with the HIAS², what was going on over there. And he...

PS: And...

AG: So I had a basic idea before I even went in.

PS: Yeah. Well you had a basic idea and then you saw the hard evidence of the, almost all but unbelievable atrocities...

AG: Right.

PS: But did you at that time, when you saw Dachau, did you in any way in your wildest imagination dream that that was just one of many, many concentration camps? That perhaps the thousand or so that you saw of the remains, did you ever think that that was only a small part of 12 million?

AG: No, I didn't, because as I say, I had an idea...

PS: Yeah.

AG: Of what was going on...

PS: But you never...

AG: Never imagined that it would be as bad as what it was. I didn't know how anyone could treat another human being in this way. And I've seen attitudes of the fellows that saw this and how they changed.

PS: Yeah, I was just going...

AG: They became very disturbed with this. Some of them that were, that didn't feel it became very bitter.

PS: Yeah, I guess at that time there were still some of the men who really still didn't know what they were fighting for.

AG: Right.

PS: But after seeing that at least they knew what they were fighting...

AG: They knew what they were fighting for...

PS: Fighting against.

AG: And they became very bitter.

PS: Yeah. So the other men in your outfit reacted much the same as...

AG: The same way.

PS: And you remained there, say, less than 24 hours.

²HIAS – Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

AG: Less than 24 hours. I, I, maybe five, six hours at the most.

PS: Has this experience had any influence on your thinking as you look back and reminisce?

AG: Yes, it has done a lot. I mean, there's a, I get more involved with things today than I...

PS: Yeah.

AG: Probably would have if I hadn't [unclear].

PS: In your own mind, can you in any way explain the German decisions that led to the setting up of these concentration camps?

AG: I, I, really, only things through what I've read, that they wanted to make a pure Aryan race. I mean...

PS: Do you know if there was any, a regimental history that included this experience, that is within your...

AG: No.

PS: Army unit?

AG: To be honest with you, I had no contact with my Army unit from Dachau.

PS: And you did hear of other servicemen who were involved in liberation.

AG: Involved in liberation.

PS: When, Al, did you first hear of the gassing of Jews, on, on such a large scale?

AG: When did I hear? I mean, well, while we were, I guess in Italy I did...

PS: Yeah.

AG: From some of the prisoners of war that, you know, while we were in Italy and we landed near one of these camps and these prisoners were, they used to feed us and things like that [unclear] got put together.

PS: How long did you remain in Europe after-- when you entered Dachau, that was the last week of the war actually.

AG: Yeah. I didn't come out of Europe until the following-- I got back in the States the following April, when I was discharged April the 6th.

PS: Yeah. So you stayed, you remained in Europe.

AG: I remained in Europe.

PS: From, that was almost a year.

AG: Almost a year.

PS: During that period, did you witness the handling and managing or distribution of concentration camp survivors?

AG: I, when I was in Austria we were far out. We went back to my outfit we were pulling guard duty at a conce-, a camp outside of, I believe it was Gusen, Austria there, a displaced persons camp.

PS: Where they were handling and resettling...

AG: Resettling...

PS: People.

AG: And then I was down in Italy for a while where I had a, we were taking the displaced persons back home to the different cities...

PS: Yeah.

AG: Towns where they came from.

PS: There were...

AG: [unclear] Italy.

PS: You think in your own mind that all, everything possible was done for these people...

AG: At that time.

PS: The survivors, at the time.

AG: At that time I think it was.

PS: Do you think that you would have had the same feelings today if you had not been an eyewitness to...

AG: No, I don't think so.

PS: These atrocities?

AG: No, I don't think I would have.

PS: I think we've reached about the end of the prepared questions and, is there anything that you would like to add to your, anything that we haven't covered, Al, that you would like to add to your testimony?

AG: Not really.

PS: Any recollections that you have that you would like to add to what we covered?

AG: No, except that, today, I mean I, you know, I'm feeling that I am involved in different organizations that...

PS: And this being only a few days from the 45th anniversary, I think there is much more being talked about and spawned.

AG: I don't think there's enough being talked about.

PS: Yeah.

AG: In our circles...

PS: Okay.

AG: Because the situations over there today, I mean, antisemitism rising and...

PS: Yeah...

AG: I think there should be more of-- talked about.

PS: I know my own reaction, when I was in the situation that you were in, was that this is so bad, and on such a large scale that a genocide such as this could never happen again.

AG: I...

PS: And yet it's...

AG: It can.

PS: Yes.

AG: That's the way I see it today.

PS: This has been Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Al Gross for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. And Al, we thank you very, very much. On behalf of Gratz College, thanks for your very valuable testimony. Thank you.