

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

THOMAS E. MAAS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: December 3, 1990

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Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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TM - Thomas E. Maas [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: December 3, 1990

*Tape one, side one:*

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing Mr. Thomas E. Maas for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Mr. Maas is a U.S. Army Veteran of World War II. The date is December 3rd, 1990. Tom, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving?

TM: The 242nd Infantry Regiment of the 42nd Division.

PS: That...

TM: In Rainbow.

PS: Yeah, Rainbow Division. And you were part of which army?

TM: Seventh.

PS: Seventh Army. You started from France? Your outfit landed...

TM: In Marseilles.

PS: In Marseilles. Oh, oh, Seventh Army. You came up from the...

TM: Yeah.

PS: Yeah, from around Toulon?

TM: No, Marseilles and then straight up...

PS: Oh, oh, Marseilles, that, yeah.

TM: Through Lyon and...

PS: Yeah.

TM: On up to Strasbourg.

PS: When you entered Europe--France and then Germany--at that time were you at all aware of the existence of concentration camps?

TM: You know, it's hard to remember whether you were or you weren't, but I think, sure, the word was out, but nobody paid much attention. They just figured it was a camp for prisoners, you know.

PS: Yeah. As you advanced northward through France, did you then see any, any evidence of Nazi atrocities against civilians or prisoners of war or...

TM: Not really.

PS: No...

TM: There was just combat.

PS: Yeah. You didn't see any prisoner of war camps within that area?

TM: No.

PS: Or prisoners...

TM: We took prisoners, but we...

PS: Yeah.

TM: ...just kept sending them back.

PS: Then, before arriving at the actual site of the concentration camp, you really didn't know too much about the mass murder that was going on within Germany.

TM: No.

PS: It's...

TM: We heard rumors, but you know.

PS: Yeah. Then you entered, you entered Germany in what section? In what area?

TM: Well straight up from Strasbourg, right on up through, I guess it's the Ruhr. Anyhow, we crossed the Rhine River on Easter Sunday.

PS: Well, I think we crossed the same day. We crossed between Worms and...

TM: We were at Worms.

PS: Yes, we probably...

TM: Is where we were.

PS: [unclear]

TM: Yes, yeah. Pontoons.

PS: [tape off then on] When you entered Germany, Tom, did you then see any examples of Nazi atrocities? In other words did you see any prisoner of war camps or...

TM: No.

PS: Any slave labor?

TM: No, well, labor, yeah. But not in camps. For instance one, it was a Dutch barge on a canal or a small river. And when they heard my name was Ma-, they say Maas, I say Mauze [phonetic], but, the Du-, when they knew that it was a Dutch name, his wife was cooking her, a meal for us. But they were loaded. The whole barge was loaded with contre [*contrebande*]-and there was a French, French soldiers lived in a house at the top of the hill. They were prisoners, but they had been working with the farmers. And he got us to take them cases of this stuff. And our truck was loaded with cases. But they were the only...

PS: Yeah, you saw them, you saw these people.

TM: Yeah.

PS: Would you say that, can you describe their physical condition?

TM: Oh, they looked like we did, you know.

PS: Yeah.

TM: Because they were barging things back and forth.

PS: Yeah. [tape off then on] Tom, to continue, you crossed the Rhine in the area of Worms, which is pretty far north.

TM: Mmm hmm.

PS: Whereas the, your final, when you arrived at the concentration camp, that was quite a distance to the south...

TM: Exactly.

PS: Near Munich. In that intervening, all those miles that you fought and traveled, did you then see any evidence of Nazi atrocities, again, prisoners of war or...

TM: No, the only...

PS: Slave...

TM: ...prisoners of war we saw were the ones that we took. We were moving pretty fast.

PS: From the Germans.

TM: Yeah. Because when we crossed the river, we turned our lights on and we went like a bat. I mean we were really moving.

PS: So that was probably very early in April?

TM: Yeah.

PS: Now we get to the concentration camp. Can you give the name of the camp that your outfit liberated?

TM: Dachau.

PS: Dachau, and the location?

TM: Outside, well it was north and a little bit west of Munich.

PS: Munich. And the date, or approximate date if possible?

TM: I think it was the 28th, 29th of April, something like that.

PS: To the best of your memory, Tom, can you describe what you saw at the camp?

TM: Well [pause], this is the first I've talked about this. I've said quite a few times, "Oh, yeah, we took Dachau." Let me lead up to this. There was an airport nearby, and this other fellow and I walked over to the airport to see some jets, something new to us. As I, as we're walking out of the gate of the airport, one of our jeeps is backing up, and he backed right into me. And there was a ditch along the road that must be six feet deep, and, you know, for runoff and stuff, you know?

PS: Yeah.

TM: And I landed in the bottom of that. So I was all right. I didn't even go to the medics. I guess I should have put a claim in, because my back kills me now. But, I was stiff, you know, and sore. And they were taking tours of the camp. And next day or two days, I don't, you know, somewhere around there. And I remember that when we went through, the rail cars were on the left, full of bodies. And I think they said the crematorium was behind the rail cars. I don't know whether it was in the gates or, I mean, in the fence or not. And bodies layin' around. Well, I didn't feel too good from this bump, so I just, [noise like "pfffft"]. I mean, that didn't make me feel any better, so I left, and waited outside for them to come out. I didn't go through the whole camp. That was enough. When I saw that, and then the way I felt from being hit by the jeep, so I left.

PS: You did see, though, you did see some of...

TM: A rail car with bodies.

PS: Yeah.

TM: Rail cars, with bodies. And bodies on the ground. And prisoners milling around.

PS: When you say prisoners, you're referring to living survivors?

TM: Yeah. Yeah.

PS: Can you estimate, Tom, of course you didn't go through the whole camp...

TM: No.

PS: But you did see a number of bodies and a lot of bodies in the boxcars?

TM: Yeah. But I didn't even think about how many there was there, so I couldn't tell you.

PS: Can you give a, somewhat, something of a little description of the living survivors that you saw.

TM: Well, you know, thin, just like you see in the pictures. Thin, and wearing their striped uniforms and standing around staring, a lot of them, because by this time it was a day or two where the Americans had been there. And...

PS: Of those that you did see, that is the living survivors, did you see any women? Any children?

TM: I don't know whether there were women or not. You know, everybody was so thin you couldn't...

PS: I guess...

TM: And a lot of them didn't have hair. So...

PS: Yeah.

TM: ...what could you tell?

PS: Your responsib-, I don't imagine then that your outfit was given any responsibilities as to the care...

TM: No.

PS: Of...

TM: Because we were sent down a road that, I know the next day we were 30 miles...

PS: Yeah.

TM: Long gone.

PS: [mumbling] Because we were, shot down toward Austria.

TM: Mmm hmm.

PS: Then you were, of course you had to leave the camp because of your physical discomfort.

TM: Yeah.

PS: The rest of your buddies in your outfit then also were not there more than one hour would you say or...

TM: I can't really...

PS: Just a, well, just a short time.

TM: Yeah, a very short time.

PS: I mean you weren't there for a day or two.

TM: No, no, no, no, no.

PS: Or three days.

TM: Because they got us moving.

PS: Yeah. To your knowledge were there any German guards still there when your outfit...

TM: I don't know. I don't know. I wouldn't see how they could be, because the stories were floating around that...

PS: Yeah.

TM: ...you know, they were beating the guards and the guards were changing and trying to escape.

PS: Probably had any been left there isolated and living on, I don't imagine they lived very long.

TM: No.

PS: So you, before you actually arrived at the site, did you know beforehand, I mean say a day or two before, that you were coming to a, was word out that there was a...

TM: I didn't.

PS: No.

TM: Now I don't know whether, you know, the regiment knew, if the Colonel or the staff or whoever, but I didn't even know the 222nd had captured it until they took us over, because each regiment had its own thing to do and you really didn't know until a day or two later what the other regiment did.

PS: Thomas, to your own reaction, did the experience of seeing the dead and the living survivors have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war? About fighting Nazi Germany?

TM: Well, the whole war I had the feeling against them, you know? And we knew it was ending up, so you had great expectations about the end of the war and going home and all this. And you felt sorry for these people that you saw. But in the back of your mind, I gotta say that you thought, "Well, it's somebody else's problem," you know?

PS: Well, at the time that you saw what you did see of Dachau, and of course you realized that there was a lot there that you didn't see...

TM: Yeah, yeah.

PS: At that time, Tom, did you realize that this was only one of many, many concentration camps?

TM: Well, they said that then.

PS: Yeah.

TM: Yeah. You know, you're a 19-year-old kid.

PS: Yeah.

TM: What are you payin' attention to what's goin' on? All you know is your squad's gotta do this, or your company has to do that, and you want to do it. That's all.

PS: Yeah, I was in the group, and they were all referring to the men, the men, the men. Yeah, you referred to the men in your outfit and all, and I said, "You know, to be confronted with this, really we weren't men. We were kids."

TM: That's right.

PS: You think, you say men, you get in the habit of saying our men...

TM: That's right.

PS: Or the men. We weren't men.

TM: That's why we...

PS: I was one of the oldest in my outfit, and I was still in my 20s.

TM: Mmm hmm. That's why when we went back to France in September to dedicate this memorial, I kiddingly said to all the guys I knew, "How come you're so old and I'm still 20?" Because to me what I was seeing was bringing back the memories of when I was 20 at that spot.

PS: Yeah. Do you know if there's any regimental history? Do you know if your regimental history includes what was seen at the concen--at Dachau?

TM: The history that I have just said that the Division, it's a Division history. It just said that, you know, the 222nd Infantry took it. And I was talking to one of the fellows--Veterans Day, they had a brunch down at the Officer's Club at Fort Mead. And I asked him, I said, I told him you were coming up, and I said, "What do you remember about it?" He said, "Not a damn thing." He said, "It just made me so sick," he said, "I couldn't walk." And seeing anything he says, "I just blotted it out." You know?

PS: Hmm.

TM: I've never, as I said before, never said anything until tonight about what I saw.

PS: I couldn't, actually for years, I spent an awful lot of time by myself. I was a salesman. And I spent hours and hours each day driving in my car and many, many nights alone in a hotel room. And just thinking about it, my eyes would, if I was doing any writing or anything, I'd have to stop because my eyes would...

TM: Yeah.

PS: ...water up so badly. Do you, did you feel any of these things? I'm speaking both about your own personal experience in combat and what you saw of, you know, the horrible sight that you, you know that you witnessed.

TM: Well, at the time, you know, there wasn't, you were disgusted with it. But you had to get on.

PS: Yeah.

TM: I mean that's all you were thinking about is what, what...

PS: You were in combat. You were still...

TM: ...you're gonna do...

PS: You were...

TM: Right.

PS: You were still in combat.

TM: Yeah. And that was something that was back the road 30 miles, you know? And when you started thinking...

PS: I know that when I was interviewed, they said, "Did your unit hold a meeting to discuss?" I said, "Meeting?" I said, "We were in the middle of combat!"

TM: That's right.

PS: And what we saw, I think, even we felt somewhat maybe a little envious of these terrible looking survivors, because at least they had survived.

TM: That's right.

PS: And we didn't know but what we'd get knocked off at the next curve in the road.

TM: Yeah.

PS: Does it still live with you to any extent? After all this 45 years?

TM: I don't think so. Because, as I said, tonight's the first I've talked about it.

PS: Yeah. There comes a time that you have to put it in the back of your mind.

TM: Put it in the back of your mind.

PS: When you left and started to travel south of Munich, you were then heading pretty much for the Austrian border.

TM: Mmm hmm.

PS: To the Austrian, you saw the Alps, snow-covered Alps...

TM: Yeah.

PS: Gradually getting closer each day. At that point did you see, oh, survivors? What I'm thinking of, south of Munich there were a lot of these small satellite camps.

TM: Yeah.

PS: Satellite, and many report and I myself saw that in traveling along through the woods and the dirt roads we saw many of these terrible, pitiful looking people who were still in their striped prison uniforms. Did you see much of that?

TM: No. In the city, as we were going through Munich we saw them in the...

PS: Yeah.

TM: ...streets, you know. But really, the little prison camps, like up in Strasbourg, France, which was before this, months before, there was an island in the middle of this river, and there was Russian DPs on it. But they all looked, you know, as healthy as...

PS: Yeah.

TM: ...you could expect, because they had been working in factories and all, you know, and it was a small place and I guess, yeah, I don't know how much like *Hogan's Hero* it was, but, they musta had a better rapport with their guards or something because well they didn't look like the people in Dachau.

PS: How long did you remain in Europe after the end of the war?

TM: Eleven months.

PS: Eleven months. During that period, now where were you? You ended up in Austria when the war ended?

TM: Yeah, the war ended, and we were on Chiemsee. And two days later they loaded us up and we thought, "Uh oh, now what?" They took us on to the island in the middle of that lake, and we toured Ludwig's palace, which was a complete surprise compared to the last time they said, "We're gonna take you somewhere."

PS: It was a little tour.

TM: And then from there our outfit was moved into Austria.

PS: Then during those eleven months, you were in Austria?

TM: Mmm hmm.

PS: Did you see anything at that time of, oh, survivors who were returning, or the handling of survivors?

TM: No. No. Again, you know, you're a kid, and they moved us into the Alps. And this one town we were in for six months, they wanted to get something for us to do. Well we were guarding German prisoners who were building a power plant, which is now completed. It supplies all of Bavaria. So that the German prisoners, you know, just looked healthy.

PS: Yeah, sure.

TM: Healthy like we did.

PS: They were prisoners of the American Army?

TM: Yeah. Yeah.

PS: So you saw nothing of concentration camps...

TM: No.

PS: ...or survivors at that time.

TM: No, the prisoners that we rounded up in the first month or two were, you heard, everybody heard about the star, or the *redal* [phonetic] and the, they were gonna fight from...

PS: Yes, in Austria.

TM: The mount-, yeah, well, we rounded up supplies that they had scattered all through the mountains. And there might have be a couple people you'd round up as a prisoner. But, they were trying to get the German Army. Our first duty the week the war ended, was to check, the people were only allowed five kilometers either side of their town. And here would come a German major riding up with some girl on each arm and all this stuff, you know, and...

PS: German?

TM: Yeah.

PS: Not under confinement?

TM: No, he would show a pass. In other words, our higher ups had given him a pass. He was gonna go round up his men and all this stuff, and, you know, so we would put

him in our little cage until we could check things out, send the girls on their way and all this kinda stuff. So they were the prisoners we saw. We didn't see any civilian prisoners.

PS: Tom, I've just about finished the questions that, you, I had in mind and noted. Is there anything at all that you would like to add to what we have gone over?

TM: Well, as far as the other concentration camps, of course when we were near Dachau, we heard that there was other ones. I don't know whether we heard the names of them or not, but they just said, "Well, this was one of many." And of course, they started to come out with pictures and you realized the extent of it. And you can look--I can--I can look at a picture of a concentration camp and it doesn't effect me like walking in that camp. Because it was live. I was there. And it happened then. You know, I can look at the pictures and feel, but it doesn't bother me. And it didn't bother me, even then, seeing pictures, in *Stars and Stripes* or wherever they were.

PS: Well, just as an afterthought, Tom, I said I'd asked you all the questions. I was just thinking that you saw, you know it happened...

TM: Yeah.

PS: That this time, at this point in time, there are probably at least a half a million living witnesses, between survivors, liberators, other soldiers, who actually saw it. And yet, even with a half a million living witnesses, there are some of these organizations, Neo-Nazi organizations and all...

TM: Yeah.

PS: ...who claim it absolutely never happened.

TM: Yeah.

PS: And my feeling is that if they have the guts to make those claims while there are still hundreds of thousands of living witnesses, what is it going to be like after we're gone...

TM: Yeah.

PS: ...and there are no longer any. That's really one of the reasons why Gratz College is one of many who are developing historical archives...

TM: Yeah.

PS: With testimony and memorabilia. So Tom, is there anything else to add?

TM: Well, you can edit this out if you want, but, there's times when I get tired a hearin' about the Holocaust. You hear so much. And the one thing that really, I think, the only thing that bothers me about is when I hear it, all I hear is six million *Jews* died. Nobody says anything about the other six million.

PS: Yeah. [tape off then on]

TM: The Gypsies, and all the other, you know.

PS: Yes.

TM: Instead of saying twelve million *people* died...

PS: See I always...

TM: You know...

PS: When I speak--well Tom, you are, we've, you've said, well, anything you wanted to add to this.

TM: Yeah, I can't...

PS: Yeah. Well, on behalf of Gratz College, and the Holocaust Oral History Archive, yeah, I want to thank you very much for your...

TM: Right.

PS: ...interview.

TM: I don't know how much good it did.

PS: Well, everything...

TM: I didn't see that much.

PS: You know, everything contributes something.

TM: Yeah.

PS: And thanks, thank you again.

TM: Okay.