

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JOSEPH P. O'DONNELL

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: March 20, 1989

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Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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JO - Joseph P. O'Donnell [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: March 20, 1989

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Joseph O'Donnell for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Mr. O'Donnell is a former prisoner of war of Germany during World War II. [tape off then on] Joe, can you tell us where in Europe and in what unit you were serving prior to your capture?

JO: I was with the 15th Air Force in Italy, 483rd Bomb Group, the 15th Bomb Squadron. It was located around Foggia, Italy. And I was shot down. I was a ball turret gunner on a B-17. I was shot down May the 2nd of 1944, over Wiener Neustadt or it would be New Vienna, Austria.

PS: So you were flying then out of a base in Italy.

JO: Yes.

PS: And from the date you were shot down then, that meant you were a prisoner of war for over, a little over a year.

JO: 363 days. [tape off then on]

PS: Prior to the time you were captured, had you witnessed any examples of German cruelty or atrocities against humanity?

JO: Well, before I answer that, I made a mistake. I was shot down May the 10th, 1944.

PS: Oh.

JO: Not May the 2nd. Would you repeat that again?

PS: Yeah, prior to the time that you were captured, had you witnessed any examples of German cruelty or atrocities against humanity?

JO: Only, I would say no. The answer is no. There was some pushing and shoving and rifle, striking with the rifle, but to the prisoners of war in the group that I was in.

PS: Well, your base in Italy, that was a time when I guess the Germans had surrendered all forces in Italy. And it was in the hands of American forces?

JO: No. Rome had not been liberated yet.

PS: Oh.

JO: German forces were still in Italy.

PS: Yeah. So you were flying out of southern Italy, which was in the hands of American forces.

JO: That's correct.

PS: At the time of your capture, had you heard any rumors or reports of the mass murder of millions of people such as Jews, political prisoners, homosexuals, Poles, Russians? Had you heard anything at all?

JO: None whatsoever.

PS: You had not heard anything of the existence of concentration camps in Germany?

JO: I don't recall of any. Probably, the statement was made, but I don't recall now that it was.

PS: When you were captured, do you recall the first location? Your first prison camp?

JO: Oh, I, fortunately, I landed way up in the mountains. And I didn't get captured until the next day. And I always claimed that the Germans couldn't find me, and I couldn't find them. But the next day, when they picked me up, I was taken to a school building. I was interrogated. I got slapped in the left ear with a German Luger. Other than that I wasn't mistreated. And I was taken into the target that we had bombed, a school building. We bombed an aircraft factory, but there was a school building nearby. And from there they took us to what they call a *Dulag-Luft*,¹ which is in Frankfurt on the Main in Germany. And there we spent about a week or so with a interrogation, but not to the extent of extensive interrogation.

PS: That was Frankfurt, being pretty well up in northern Germany. That was...

JO: No, this, there's two Frankfurts.

PS: Oh, oh.

JO: One is on the Main and one is on the Oder.

PS: I was thinking of on the Main. [tape off then on] To continue, Joe, in your interrogation, was there really intense interrogation as to location of your air bases and strength of the Air Force? Was there much interrogation along those lines?

JO: No. Because they had so many of us, and all they, what they did is they gave us a form to fill out, and all we did was put our name, rank, and serial number on it. And they told us that we wouldn't get any, this was for the Red Cross, that we wouldn't get any letters home if we didn't fill out the entire thing. But no one ever filled it out. They weren't, the Germans weren't too interested in the enlisted men. They were more interested in the officers, because the officers, the navigator knew what the target was. The pilot knew where he was going to go, but the enlisted men, we just went along to do our job.

PS: You were, what was your rank at that time?

JO: I was a staff sergeant.

PS: And a gunner on the B-17?

JO: Yeah, ball turret gunner.

PS: Yeah. Joe, do you, are you aware of how much time elapsed between the time that you were shot down and captured, between that and the time that your family

¹*Dulag-Luft*, a concentration camp/POW camp for Air Force enlisted men in Germany.

received word that either you were missing in action or captured and a prisoner of Germans?

JO: I was, like I say, I was shot down May the 10th. I think the--it was about two months before my mother got a telegram that I was missing in action. And about a month after that it was that I was a prisoner of war.

PS: So they must have been three very hard months...

JO: Yeah.

PS: ...for the family. Joe then there was no intense interrogation in which there were any--you did not see others going through intense interrogation by the Germans...

JO: No.

PS: Where there were beatings inflicted or...

JO: No, none whatsoever.

PS: Then you were transported to a camp in Frankfurt. While interned there, was it used only as a prison, a prisoner of war camp? Or was it also used as a concentration camp?

JO: No, I went from the interrogation camp at Frankfurt on the Main, which is on the Main River...

PS: Yeah.

JO: That's what it is. It's close to the French border. And I spent about five days on the Forty and Eight² boxcars to a camp in Pomerania--then. It's Poland now. It was called *Stalag Luft 4* and the camp was located at Gross-Teitschau [phonetic] in Pomerania. But, what, repeat that question again. I get carried away. [chuckles]

PS: No, I was wondering if there were, if the camp was also used as a...

JO: Oh, okay.

PS: For, as a concentration camp.

JO: It was strictly Air Force enlisted men. And there were 10,000. There were about 800 British in there, but there were, the rest were all American Air Corps enlisted men. There were no beatings. There were, if you did not obey the rules and regulations, then there was solitary confinement and punishment. But I never witnessed any of it.

PS: But otherwise there was no cruelty, cruelty as such, to those, for those who were obeying orders and minding their own business, you witnessed no cruelty?

JO: There was one very cruel incident where a camp in Lithuania was evacuated. It was called *Stalag Luft 6*. And these were all enlisted men. They were put on coal barges and shipped from Memel [in Lithuania] to Swinemünde [border of NE Germany and NW Poland], which is around the Stettin area on the mouth of the Oder river. And they were put in the holds of these coal barges, and they were not allowed out those four or five days, and they were given one bucket of water. And that same bucket is where they would go to the toilet. And one fellow, this--I'd never witnessed this, it's documented-

²Forty and Eight is a type of boxcar, used in World War I and World War II, which transported forty men or eight horses. *World War II Encyclopedia*.

-went insane and he jumped overboard and the Germans shot him. When they arrived at the camp at *Stalag*³ *Luft* 4, the railroad station is called Keefite [phonetic]. And two prisoners of war were handcuffed together. And they had what they called "The Mad Captain", whose family was killed in a bombing raid. And when they left the forty-and-eight boxcars, and it was a two to three mile distance from the train station to the camp. And this Mad Captain incited the, they were young, *Kriegs-marines*, guards, and they had machine guns set up in the woods alongside of the road. And they made them run. They were handcuffed together. And they had the German police dogs. And this German captain kept inciting the *Kriegs-marines* to jab the prisoners of war with bayonets, and cut the, they had Red Cross parcels on their backs, personal belongings. And the *Kriegs-marines* would take their bayonets and cut the straps so that the civilians along the way could get their personal belongings and food. And, when they finally--the ones that--when they went down, two of them would go down. Then they would sick the dogs on them and they would bayonet them. There were several that bled to death, when the--before they got into the camp. Then, when they got to the camp, they had to wait outside. They weren't allowed in the camp. They kept them out there overnight, with no shelter whatsoever. One of the fellows, when they did let them into the camp, one of the fellows came into the barracks that I was in. And this was in July of 1944, and he would strip down, he would lay out on the, on a blanket in the sun. And we counted. He had 55 bayonet wounds in his back and his buttocks. But that was a, one of the--*the* atrocity of the camp. There were some that were shot. One fellow that was chewing chewing gum and he spit, and a German officer thought he was spitting at him, and pulled his revolver and shot him. There were others that mistakenly, they had a warning wire inside of the camp, and if you touched the warning wire, you would be shot at. If you went over the warning wire, they would shoot to kill. And he went over the warning wire and they shot him. But as a whole, the atrocities, there were no atrocities in the camp.

PS: In this camp were there any Russian...

JO: There were Russian...

PS: Prisoners?

JO: Russian prisoners of war. They would, they were on the detail of all the dirty work. We had outside latrines and they had what we called the "Honey Wagon". And it was a big tank that was drawn by oxen. And it would, they'd come in, they'd put a hose down into the latrine, and they'd pump a cylinder with gas, and they'd light a fuse, and that lid would blow up. They had a spring on it, and it would cause a suction in there. Then they would take all that human excrement, and they would dump it between the compounds. Like we had the four compounds--A, B, C, and D. And between the compounds there was a 20 foot area where they dumped all that human excrement in there.

³*Stalag* is an abbreviation for *Stammlager* which is a German prisoner of war camp for non-commissioned or enlisted prisoners of war.

PS: You've described some acts of cruelty, such as on the marches. In consideration of that and the few other things you've described, would you say that the Germans adhered reasonably well to the terms of the Geneva Convention?

JO: Yes, there's two parts. One is in the prisoner of war camp itself. And there I would say that we, don't misunderstand this, we insisted that they would adhere to the Geneva Convention. And they did to a great extent. But there were times, when even when the Germans themselves, as far as food, and, I think Murray Granger mentioned it in his interview, is that anything that moved on the road, particularly in the end of 1944 and through the early months of 1945, that food was almost impossible to get. But in its--in the camp itself, like I say, there's two parts to that. I spent eight months or so in the camp, nine months in the camp, and there I would say that they adhered to the Geneva Convention, not 100 percent, but within reasonable...

PS: Were your work details very heavy and...

JO: We were not allowed to go out on work details. You know, someone would say, "Well, you were very lucky." But there is two types of fatigue, one is mental and the other is physical. And mental fatigue, or mental idleness, I've been told, you know, is worse than physical work.

PS: Yeah, I believe.

JO: But...

PS: What was-- were there any responsibilities that were given to you and your fellow prisoners? Any program of activities?

JO: We made our, we ran the camp like a democracy. We had a camp leader. We had a camp, or, barracks leaders. We had room leaders. And the--it was a democracy 100 percent. The Germans, the German Commandant, they want this, because they don't want you to escape. They want you to, all, as long as you're occupied, you're not diggin' tunnels or...

PS: Yeah.

JO: You know, causing them trouble.

PS: Can you give an approximate figure of the total number of prisoners in that *Luft Stalag*?

JO: It, the figure would be 10,000.

PS: Of the 10,000, do you believe that the survival rate was, most of the 10,000 did survive their stay in the, in this *Stalag*?

JO: In this camp itself, I know of, oh, maybe ten that were, well, executed, one way or the other. There were some deaths of appendicitis, some ailment that would come along that the facilities weren't there to treat. But there was no intentional gassing or that type of thing.

PS: Yeah. Was there good, reasonable medical attention available for those who got sick of, say flu, pneumonia, appendicitis? Was there reasonably good...

JO: In the camp itself...

PS: ...medical...

JO: It was only like an emergency type of thing. I heard--I don't know and I never experienced it--but someone with a major operation, they would send them into one of the cities. And they did make an attempt to, in that type of a situation. But if you had a toothache, or if you needed morphine, or something to that extent, if you weren't on a critical list, you wouldn't get it.

PS: There were no medical officers who themselves were prisoners of war who...

JO: Yes, we had...

PS: ...attended the...

JO: We had several medical officers, one in particular that I know is Captain Leslie Kaplan. And I will say this, is that--he's dead now, he died ten or so years ago--but I will say that on the march, that if it wasn't for him, there wouldn't be a lot of, I wouldn't, I probably wouldn't be here today at all.

PS: Really? Were, to your knowledge, were there any Jewish prisoners of war in this *Stalag*?

JO: Yes, there were. There, how many, I do not know. But I know one personally, he is from my hometown in Riverside, New Jersey, Emmanuel Brum [phonetic].

PS: Were you aware of any difference in the treatment accorded the Jewish prisoners of war as opposed to the non-Jews?

JO: I, I'm not aware that there was a different treatment. In fact, I would say that since I was in the Air Corps, and they were in the Air Corps, is that the treatment was the same.

PS: Mmm hmm. Joe, while you were a prisoner, up until the time of your capture, you had heard nothing whatsoever about the Nazis, the Nazi atrocities against humanity in general. While you were a prisoner, did you hear any rumors or any information at all about what was going on in the world outside as far as atrocities?

JO: No. I wouldn't say that we weren't concerned, but we had other concerns. I would feel that if they, if someone did say they were going on, that it was such a mass type of thing that is that no one believed it anyway.

PS: Yeah.

JO: Which was common throughout the world. But I'd never heard of anything.

PS: Was there any communication at all that you had with the outside world? Did anybody make a radio to receive or something to transmit?

JO: Yeah, every camp had radios. I never saw one. But they would come around with the news. It was a common type of thing. I think the Germans knew that they had it. In fact, a lot of times they would give us false propaganda. But, anything that would come on would be of the evasion, invasion of Europe or any, the progress of the war. There

wasn't anything that would be prolonged, because if you had to, if they had the radio on too long, the Germans would be able to pick it up.

PS: Well were you able, were they able with these radios to get broadcasting stations outside of Germany?

JO: BBC.

PS: Oh, BBC.

JO: The British Broadcasting.

PS: So the news that you, the little news you were getting was authentic and not just German...

JO: That is correct.

PS: ...propaganda. Can you, do you recall the date that you were liberated, and by whom?

JO: I was liberated May the 10th, 1944 by the British Second Army, and it was up around, above Hannover, Germany, and northeast of Hamburg, Germany. It was a town called Gudow, G-U-D-O-W. It was in the farmland. We were in a barn when we were told that we were going to be liberated. It was by the British.

PS: Did you expect liberation at that time?

JO: Oh yes.

PS: You knew that it was, that...

JO: Sure.

PS: Allied troops, British or American were approaching soon.

JO: We were on this, the reason why we were up in that area, we were on this march of 86 days, approximately 600 miles. And we had been in a camp, *Stalag*, this was a *Stalag*, not *Stalag Luft*. 11-B, in Fallingbistel. And we could hear the guns, the battle front. And they moved us out. Our guards then were the Home Guard. And then I was 21 years old, and the ones guarding us were up in 65s, like I am today. And they cared less one way or the other...

PS: Yeah.

JO: So that we got a lot of information from them.

PS: There was no defense of the *Stalag*, I mean as far as the German troops were concerned? In other words, as the British advanced, there was no resistance in that area against their advance?

JO: Well, that--I know there was, because we had passed some ammunition, German ammunition trucks that were blown up. But in the particular area that I was in there was no fighting there.

PS: And no German troops remained to actually defend the camp...

JO: No.

PS: ...against the British. Was there, the guards you say were Home Guards. Were they still there when the British entered and took...

JO: [unclear]

PS: ...over the camp?

JO: The second camp that I went to, we were evacuated from that camp, so, and that was in April. So I spent almost another month on the road marching. So I wasn't in a camp when I was liberated.

PS: Oh, oh. That was a 600-mile forced march?

JO: Yes.

PS: 600.

JO: Now, if you take a look at a map of Poland and Belgard [Bialogard in Polish], Poland, which would be one place, one city that you would be able to pick out right away on the map, and if you measured the miles to Hannover, Germany, it wouldn't come out to 600. But we backtracked. I crossed the Elbe River three times. So, then we circled around and so, if you put all the circles and everything, it would come out close to 600 miles. We didn't walk the 600 miles continuous. We had breaks where we had layovers, and, it consisted of anywhere from 10 miles to 25 miles a day.

PS: And this would have been in the early Spring of March, April?

JO: We left the camp at *Stalag Luft 4*, it was in the bitterest winter in the history of Germany. And it was, which the Battle of the Bulge, and we, you fellows have...

PS: Well...

JO: The temperatures were down...

PS: Yeah!

JO: Twenty below zero when we left.

PS: [mumbling]

JO: That part of it there was where the Germans still upheld the, as much as they could, the Geneva Convention. But it was such a mass exodus that the thing was, with no food, and...

PS: The entire camp of, you say approximately 10,000...

JO: Yes.

PS: Were all on this march?

JO: No. Out of the 10,000, there were several thousand, I'll say 2,000 or so, that were evacuated, they were the sick and the wounded and the cripples. They were evacuated north by forty-and-eight boxcar to *Stalag Luft 1*, Barth, Germany. Others were evacuated, they went south down to Nuremberg and Lusburg [phonetic] by boxcar. And there were several thousand in that group. There were other groups that went out. There were British that went out. The group that I was in, there was around 2,000. We didn't all leave at the same time. There was about 1,000 one day and 1,000 the next. And through the course of the march we were separated into groups of maybe five hundred. And finally it wound up that we were in groups of 200. And the group I was in when I was liberated was around 100. But they were dispersed throughout Germany.

PS: When you were liberated, then, you were in the hands of the British.

JO: Yes.

PS: Are you satisfied that your processing by the British and then by the Americans was efficient? And that...

JO: Excellent.

PS: Excellent. Good.

JO: We were liberated May the 2nd. We were instructed to march into this small town, and on the way we raided a dairy and we got some cheese and milk. And then we were, went into the town that the British requested that we go, which was British held.

PS: In Germany.

JO: In Germany. We were given tea and biscuits and bread and some stew. And the next day we were instructed to get, the best way we could, to Lunberg or Laurenburg I think it was. Laurenburg, Germany, across the Oder River. And my buddy and I hitched a ride on a British truck. We were deloused, bathed, fed. We were given British uniforms. Our clothes, the ones we had on, and they burned all that, made a big bonfire. We spent about two days there, then we went out to a field and we slept. We had tents. We slept on the ground. And fortunately for me and about 100 of us, we were flown directly to England. We were going to the La Havre, the Camp Lucky Strike...

PS: Yes.

JO: But they were British planes, and when we took off, they told us that the war was just about over, and they were gonna take us right on in to the hospital in England, which we did. But we had excellent treatment, and expedited as efficiently as they could.

PS: When you said that they gave you British uniforms, then you started to say that the uniform you had on was the, were you gonna say was the one that you had when you were originally captured?

JO: No.

PS: Oh. [chuckles]

JO: We [chuckles] were in the Air Corps, and we wore flying suits. And they weren't made for, they were strictly made for flying.

PS: Yeah, that's right too.

JO: So, after we were captured and into the camp and everything, then these and the flying boots, they just wore out. We had old clothes on, you know, that were underneath our flying suits and everything. But the Red Cross and the YMCA eventually got to us and we got Army overcoats, which they called greatcoats.

PS: Greatcoats.

JO: And shoes and socks and underwear. But on the march, the clothes that we had, was what we had on for three months, without a bath or shave or...

PS: After your liberation, Joe, how long was it before you had contact with your family?

JO: I sent letters home, but I had no personal, no other contact other than letters. I received no letters. They received mine, but...

PS: While you were in the camp?

JO: While I...

PS: Did you write...

JO: After liberation.

PS: Oh, oh. But while you were in the camp, those *Luft Stalags*, you were not, there was no communication out of the...

JO: Oh yes, yes. I, I don't know, we had a letter, we could send one letter and one post card a month. And I think I got about six letters from my mother.

PS: They received all or most of...

JO: Yes.

PS: Most of yours? Packages? Were food packages...

JO: I never received a package, although some did come in, very few. Now my mother said that she sent about three or four of them, but I never got a one of them.

PS: The last question, Joe, is one that I asked Murray Granger just a short time ago. That is, on the subject of the television series, after the war, that pictured the life of Americans in German prison camps as, oh, constantly harassing their captors, leading a very happy existence, picturing the German captors as blubbing idiots, after the war when you were back to your civilian life, did you resent, I mean it pictured, the fact that some people probably believed that this was the life of prisoners of war, did you hold any resentment when you saw these comedies of...

JO: Oh definitely. And, but even these television programs or radio programs, they were depicted life in as a lark. But even before then, a lot of people, in fact, I've noted in one of my books, is that they got, prisoners of war got letters in Germany that they said, you know, "Should I send you some swim trunks? I hear that you're swimming." And, "If you go into town, don't kiss the girls," and, you know.

PS: [laughing] Yeah!

JO: They, that was before *Hogan's Heroes* or any of it even came out.

PS: That was during the war itself.

JO: During the war, yeah. But, that particular program was, *Hogan's Heroes*, has hurt us immensely.

PS: Terrible.

JO: Because they, the people really, now we did harass the Germans. But not the way that it depicted on television.

PS: Well, I myself, thank God I was not a prisoner. But being as close, you know, I was actually in combat, and I, myself not having been a prisoner, deeply resented, you know, making a comedy, making, putting the whole thing in, and realizing that many, many people would believe, you know, that this was the way it was.

JO: Yeah.

PS: I've...

[End of tape one, side one.]

Tape one, side two:

PS: ...Joseph O'Donnell. Joe, I was just asking you if there was anything you would like to add to your testimony other than the direct answers, you know, from the questions that I asked you. Any comments or...

JO: I have often been asked, you know, how I was treated, and about the German people. And I always say that, I make a distinction between the Nazis and the German people. I have run into occasions, I know myself, where I've been treated fairly with the German population, when we were on the road, by the German guards. But then, I'm not talking about the Nazis or the S.S. That's a different story completely. I have replies from different people that I, ex-prisoners of war, and they were, one of the stories they were marching through a town, where a German woman had a cane, and she was beating the ex-, the prisoners of war when they went by. And when the German guard went around the corner, she lifted up her apron and handed the prisoners of war two loaves of bread. And that, you must remember that the United States held prisoners of war, Germans. And the ones that the mothers and the families of the German prisoners of war in America or in England, they thought, if they treated the American prisoners of war fairly, that their sons would be treated fairly. So there is a distinction that it is not the entire German race is bad. You made a statement before that they were cultured people we've ever had. It's just a shame that you get caught with the Nazis. There is a different story, and they had no respect whatsoever. I just want to make that statement.

PS: Yeah. Well, I appreciate it. Joe, thank you very, very much for your testimony, which will immediately become a part of, permanent part, of the Gratz Holocaust Oral History Archive. And certainly your testimony will add great, you know, importance and interest, and we thank you very, very much.

JO: Thank you.

[End of tape one, side two; end of interview.]