

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MAURICE J. WASSER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip Solomon
Date: December 2, 1994

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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MW- Maurice J. Wasser [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: December 2, 1994

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Philip Solomon interviewing Mr. Maurice Wasser for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Mr. Wasser is a veteran of World War II. He was captured by the Germans and held as a prisoner of war in Germany. Today's date, the date of this interview, is December 2nd, 1994. Mr. Wasser, will you please tell us where in Europe and in what unit you were serving prior to your capture?

MW: I was with the 325th Fighter Group, 317th Fighter Squadron, stationed out of Lesina, in the heel of the boot near Foggia.

PS: The very southern tip of Italy.

MW: That's correct, yes.

PS: Your flight, you say a fighter pilot, fighter, a P-...

MW: P-51.

PS: P-51.

MW: Yes.

PS: Yeah.

MW: Mustang.

PS: Was most of your missions flying protection for the B-17s...

MW: Yes...

PS: The liberators that...

MW: Most of them were protection but once in a while we were allowed to go down and take targets of opportunities, strafe whatever we wanted.

PS: Mostly to the north in...

MW: Yes.

PS: Towards Austria, Germany?

MW: Yes.

PS: What, about what date, roughly about what time did you go into that area?

MW: I went in, I went overseas in October of '44 and I was sent over to Lesina from there.

PS: And that was after...

MW: We were...

PS: ...D-Day?

MW: Oh yes.

PS: Yeah. The Allies were by then pretty well into France?

MW: Yes, they were.

PS: And Italy had been conquered at that point?

MW: Yes.

PS: We expect that many years in the future students will be studying Holocaust, and the time element I think is important to point out so they'll have the right perspective. During that period, Mr. Wasser, were you aware of what was happening within Germany, or rather, to begin, in Italy itself, did you see very much evidence of Nazi atrocities in Italy?

MW: Not where I was stationed, no.

PS: No. Then too I guess you were pretty much on the air base.

MW: Yeah.

PS: Yeah.

MW: That's true. I did spend one week in Rome when I was finished my tenth mission they let you go out on, you know, leave. But I didn't notice any Nazi atrocities there.

PS: Were you hearing anything at that point of Nazi atrocities? Mainly, did you hear anything at all of the Nazi death camps, concentration camps, gas chambers, crematorium?

MW: No, I can honestly say I didn't know much about that.

PS: When were...

MW: I heard of a few things, you know, like the trouble they had in Poland with the big section there that...

PS: But you never in your wildest imagination could have imagined anything would be that--it was going on right at that time. Even, this was toward the end of the war and...

MW: No, I didn't know...

PS: We didn't...

MW: ...too much about that.

PS: Right. Did you have any, were you conscious of the risk of being captured by the Germans? You realize maybe that as a Jewish, American-Jewish flier, that you were, could be subject to...

MW: Well, when I bailed out of my airplane, I threw my dog tags away...

PS: Oh.

MW: ...because I had the hunch about that.

PS: Yeah. Yeah, I was going to ask you if you did dispose of the dog tags.

MW: Yes.

PS: You were, well you threw the, in other words your dog tags had the "H"...

MW: Yes.

PS: The large "H".

MW: That's correct.

PS: Were you given any choice of having the "H" appear or not appear?

MW: No, I don't remember that at all.

PS: Then, a few members of the Air Force that I interviewed said that they were, they carried two, they were given another set of dog tags.

MW: While they were on the flight?

PS: Yeah. And that, but...

MW: I was never given that opportunity, that I remember.

PS: But from what they said, they, none of them used, all of them still preferred to retain their Jewish identity. At the time, oh, now getting to the point you were shot down over Germany.

MW: Yes. I was shot down over a little town called Waklabruk [phonetic], in the southern part of Germany.

PS: In, anywhere around the area of Munich?

MW: Yes. That's where I think it was, around the area of Munich.

PS: You were then taken to, you were treated as an Air Force officer, right?

MW: Well, originally they put me in a jail in Waklabruk. And I was there for about three, four days and they had another, some, a couple of more English flyers held there also. So when we got about three of us, they shipped us all to Nuremberg.

PS: To a...

MW: Not to Nuremberg, I'm sorry. It was, they sent to Frankfurt am Main.

PS: Oh, pretty far to the north.

MW: Yes.

PS: That was a, oh, during the time you were in jail, before being sent to the *Luftwaffe*, not *Luftwaffe*, the special Air Force...

MW: Yes.

PS: I think they had separate...

MW: A *Kriegsgefangene* [POW].

PS: Well while a prisoner in the jail close to the town close to Munich, were you interrogated there?

MW: No.

PS: No one...

MW: That's why we were sent to an interrogation center...

PS: Oh, oh.

MW: ...in Frankfurt am Main.

PS: And they made no attempt to identify you...

MW: No.

PS: Through your dog tags?

MW: No.

PS: You were...

MW: I didn't have my dog tags.

PS: Oh, oh, yeah, you said...

MW: I told them I was German.

PS: Yeah.

MW: When they asked me I told them I was German.

PS: So there was no interrogation or animosity? Was the treatment reasonably fair?

MW: Well, in Waklabruk it's a little small [tape off then on] when I parachuted down, they took me over to see my plane. And the people were surprised that the Americans were stationed there. They thought we were coming over from America to bomb them and then going back to America. That's how well they knew what was going on.

PS: So then you were sent by train up to the area near...

MW: Frankfurt am Main.

PS: Frankfurt am Main.

MW: Yes.

PS: To a prisoner of war camp especially for the...

MW: Interrogations.

PS: Yeah. And now your treatment there was, can you give us an idea of...

MW: Well, what I was, when we arrived at Frankfurt am Main, myself and the two other Englishmen, as we were walking through the town to get to the interrogation center, American bombers were coming over. So we all ran for the, we all ran for the, to be safe, you know. And when we went into this shelter the Germans kicked us out, the prisoners. And they put us up against the wall and they said, "If they drop one bomb we're gonna kill you." Fortunately they didn't drop a bomb. So we were marched to the interrogation center. When I got there they put me in a room by myself. And I was there for a few days. And, from what I can remember anyway. When I looked at the wall I saw that other prisoners were there and I saw like they were there fifty days, sixty days. I figured how the hell can you stand it for so many days in a room like that? There was no bed or anything. It was just on the floor. But when they, so they called me in and they interrogated me. And I tried to tell them stories that we had so many [unclear] and we were just loaded and we--then he opened a book and showed me my squadron where I came from and who was the commander and everything else. They knew more about our squadron than I could tell them. So from there then they shipped me out. I was there for about ten days, that's all.

PS: And, again, was anything said about religion? Any, I noticed your records do show religion as being Jewish and...

MW: Well, when I got to the regular camp.

PS: Oh.

MW: That's when I told them I was Jewish.

PS: But nothing was said at that point.

MW: No.

PS: Now the regular prisoner of war camp was...

MW: Yes.

PS: And what was the [tape off then on; long pause] How old were you at this point, Mr. Wasser?

MW: Well, it was 1944, oh now, let's see, it was '45, February of '45 I went down. So I was 22 years old.

PS: Can we go back, Mr. Wasser to your arrival at the P.O.W. camp near Nuremberg? You were then interrogated further?

MW: Not really, no.

PS: Not really?

MW: No the only, the whole interrogation took place in Frankfurt am Main.

PS: And was there anything involved with your religion at that point?

MW: No. I told them I was Jewish but, you know, they wanted all my information so they let the Americans know that I was there...

PS: Were they...

MW: ...supposedly.

PS: Were they at all disturbed by the fact that you had thrown away your dog tags, or didn't have your dog tags?

MW: No, no. They didn't seem to be.

PS: And you, did you admit your religion under any duress or...

MW: No.

PS: You readily...

MW: Yes.

PS: And there were no comments or no reaction; no negative reaction on their part?

MW: No.

PS: Were you with fellow American prisoners at that point?

MW: Yes.

PS: Were there any other, to your knowledge, any other Jewish prisoners?

MW: Now to tell you the truth, I don't remember.

PS: Yeah.

MW: There might have been but I don't remember.

PS: Well, if there was any issue made of religion, and if there had been a separation, you probably would have remembered.

MW: Oh yes, sure.

PS: So that would probably indicate that...

MW: You know, they put me into a bunk area with a bunch of other fellows.

PS: Yes. And no segregation...

MW: No.

PS: For you. You were in with other Je-, a...

MW: Other flyers.

PS: Flyers, yeah, the other flyers. And as far as you know then there was no segregation of American Jewish prisoners?

MW: Not at that part, not at that place anyways.

PS: Yeah. Now, from there how long were you there?

MW: Well, I was there in the end of February and we were released when Patton came in. And we were released on Mother's Day.

PS: Oh...

MW: In May.

PS: That was, yeah, Patton. Yeah we were, in May? Well they got to Nuremberg...

MW: Well I wasn't in Nuremberg anymore.

PS: Oh.

MW: They marched us down to Moosburg. They knew that they, the Americans are closing in...

PS: Oh, oh.

MW: So they put us on a forced march to Moosburg.

PS: The--so you arrived at this prison camp in Moosburg.

MW: Right.

PS: Can you spell that?

MW: M-O-O-S-E-B-U-R-G. [Moosburg is the correct spelling.]

PS: And then you were there from that date, February 1944...

MW: Yes.

PS: ...until liberation, which would have been early...

MW: Not February of '44. February of '45.

PS: '45. I'm sorry.

MW: Right.

PS: I was thinking '45 and...

MW: Yeah.

PS: So you were there until liberation, which was early May 1945.

MW: Yes, about the middle of May it must have been.

PS: Do you remember the, was it 7th Army, 3rd Army, the liberators?

MW: It was Patton himself.

PS: Oh, oh! Really?

MW: He came in with this, with his white ivory handles like...

PS: That would have been 3rd Army.

MW: I guess it was.

PS: Now, so up until then, and through your entire months of incarceration you didn't, were not aware or saw nothing, no indication of any mistreatment, of any other, were there any other ethnic groups that were...

MW: The only time I saw mistreatment is on the forced march, from Nuremberg down to Moosburg, if anybody dropped out of the march and couldn't do it, the SS was behind him and they took care of him when they got to him.

PS: Shot these men?

MW: Yeah.

PS: Now, what was the distance from...

MW: It was 60 miles.

PS: ...Moosburg?

MW: I, that's what I think it was, about sixty miles.

PS: It was a forced march?

MW: Yes, it was a forced march and we slept at night in the forests. That, they got up and the next day we went again.

PS: Yeah. The weather at that point was getting toward spring?

MW: Yeah. It was fairly cold. I had a little bit of dysentery from that march. And I had a guy who helped me. He helped me finish the march.

PS: At that time, Mr. Wasser, your rank was First Lieutenant?

MW: Second Lieutenant.

PS: Second Lieutenant?

MW: Yes.

PS: The treatment that you received in the few POW camps you were in, would you say that the Germans adhered reasonably well to the terms of the Geneva Convention?

MW: Well we didn't get any packages. The, what do you call them again? The-- with the goods from America.

PS: Yeah, the Red...

MW: Yeah, Red Cross packages.

PS: Yeah, Red Cross.

MW: We didn't get any of that. And we got one loaf of bread between fourteen fellows every day.

PS: And that was...

MW: That was it.

PS: ...special treatment for officers of the United States Air Force?

MW: That's correct.

PS: Which probably was better than, and most Allies were enlisted men and...

MW: Well, once in a while they would bring in something else. I couldn't eat it. It was just, the tea was terrible. It was ersatz tea. And one day they brought in a, some kind of a soup with corn in it. And I started to eat that. And then I noticed a little black spot in the center of every one of the corns so I pushed one open to see, and it was a bug in it. But I ate it anyway. I was hungry.

PS: So during that period you really saw no indication any mistreatment of any ethnic group or any racial group?

MW: Not while I was in the camp.

PS: Yeah.

MW: Only on the march.

PS: Right. And that was not aimed racially or ethnically?

MW: No, no, if anybody fell out, no matter who they were, they were goners.

PS: Were you aware at that time of the advance of the Allied troops in...

MW: Oh sure. Well, we knew they were. That's why they took us out of Nuremberg.

PS: Yeah. Oh, you knew it was because of the approach...

MW: Yeah, we knew they were coming. Well, when I went on that mission, that mission I went down on, they told us not to try to escape because that the Americans were advancing. So when we went down we just didn't bother even trying to escape.

PS: Now during that period you were getting--did you hear anything at all about what later became known as the Holocaust?

MW: Oh yes.

PS: You were aware of...

MW: Yes, when we were released from camp, some of us fellows just took off. And we went around areas. And we got a hint of it.

PS: Yeah. But while a prisoner you were not...

MW: No.

PS: You were not aware...

MW: No.

PS: ...of the gas chambers, the crematoria...

MW: No.

PS: ...and so forth? Now you, do you think your general physical and mental conditions were in fairly, you were in fairly good condition at that point?

MW: Yeah, the only thing that happened was I lost quite a bit of weight in those few months, that's all.

PS: Yeah. Did you see anything at all of the American Red Cross, as far as coming in for inspection or, you say there were no packages?

MW: Well, like I said, we took off, and me and a few other guys...

PS: No, I mean before liberation.

MW: Oh, no.

PS: Then how long was it--oh, while a prisoner, were you afforded the privilege of writing and receiving mail to and from home?

MW: No.

PS: You received no mail...

MW: No.

PS: And you were not permitted to...

MW: No.

PS: ...to write.

MW: Right, no.

PS: Had your family been advised that you were a prisoner of war?

MW: Yeah, they, it just so happened that I, when I went down the fellow in another plane saw me, and circled until I landed.

PS: Yeah, saw you parachute.

MW: Yeah. And he, when he got back there he told somebody about it and someone wrote to my wife, my future wife at that time, that I had--see, they'd listed me as missing but comrades believe pilots safe and [unclear].

PS: Oh, that helped.

MW: Yeah, because...

PS: So they...

MW: They waved to me when I got down.

PS: But they did not receive any official word from the War Department...

MW: No.

PS: ...that you were...

MW: My parents didn't either. My parents already knew that I was missing in action. And when I was liberated from the Moosburg camp, that's when they got a letter saying that they, my name was on the rolls there and that I was believed I was safe.

PS: Then how long, after the actual liberation, were you in voice contact with your family?

MW: No, I didn't get in contact with my family until they shipped us back to Frank-, to Reims, France.

PS: Then you were...

MW: That was a repatriation camp.

PS: Oh.

MW: And I was allowed to make a phone call then.

PS: Then...

MW: They, my family already knew that I was...

PS: Yeah.

MW: ...alive.

PS: But it was good to hear from you.

MW: I'm sure!

PS: Now how long after that, the liberation, were you returned to the United States?

MW: I was in Rheims, France, let's see--May, I think in June, some time in June we got on a, they shipped us back to the, to a seaport and we went on an ocean liner back to the Virginia, Newport News.

PS: What month was...

MW: That was in June.

PS: Oh, June of '45.

MW: Yes.

PS: Do you ever get any flashes of memory of disturbing, from that period of, either during the time in combat or during the period of incarceration?

MW: No, I guess I blocked it out of my mind.

PS: That's good. I'm curious, you know, in the period, quite a few years after the end of the war there were quite a few television comedy programs like *Hogan's Heroes*.

MW: Oh I watch that all the time.

PS: Yeah. Watching it myself, and I was in combat of course but I fortunately, I didn't have the suffering of being a prisoner of war, but did you ever watch it and get deep resentment at the fact that they pictured the German guards as blubbery idiots and the American prisoners were the...

MW: Well, at the time that I was in prison camp, most of the guards were the old Germans, not there weren't any young ones. There were only older ones. And they were a little bit nicer to us than the young guys. In fact while we were on that forced march they were helping us all they could there. Because I think they knew the war was about over and they were trying to be nice, you know.

PS: Yeah.

MW: I think that had something to do with it.

PS: Their, oh certainly. At that point they could almost hear the sound of American and British artillery and...

MW: Sure.

PS: I guess, is there, I've asked just about all the questions that I had in mind. Is there anything in addition that you would like to add to your experiences?

MW: Well, when I went down that day, I was strafing. I was, I hit a truck, and I was as, as I was pulling up I heard my, I heard something hit my airplane. And the fluid in the engine was--I was losing the fluid in the engine. So I started to head towards the lines of the Russians, because I knew it wasn't too far. And they said I would be able to fly for at least five minutes, even if I lost all the fluid. So I figured I could make it to the Russian lines. But it didn't last five minutes.

PS: Oh.

MW: And I went down near Waklabruk, like I said earlier. And the people all were around. Well, when I went down I ran into the forest and I was hiding there. And when I finally felt that maybe it was, the coast was clear, I picked my head up to see what was around, and these Hitler Youths were all there with guns pointing at me. And of course I yelled, "Comrade," you know, *Kamera'd*.

PS: Yeah. There were many stories that many of the German civilians were so incensed by American bombing that they killed a number of...

MW: Well, you see, that would happen in the cities, closer to the big cities.

PS: Frankfurt and I guess the northern industrial...

MW: Yeah, well like when...

PS: ...areas of Germany.

MW: I was in Frankfurt am Main I told you they...

PS: Yeah.

MW: ...pushed us out of the shelter then and they wanted, we once thought we were gonna get killed. But down there they didn't know that, they didn't know anything about us. In fact, one of my, I understand a little German so I heard one of them say, "There's our *Kleiner* [a small person.]" They didn't show any badness towards us at all.

PS: You were hit by anti-aircraft was it or a...

MW: Yes, anti-aircraft.

PS: At that time, I'm just reflecting, we began to the ground troops to see German jet planes, German jet fighters. We were, did you have any experience in...

MW: I didn't have it with them but I heard some of the stories that were brought back that this jet fighter went right through the squadron, you know, just, at a fast pace. Nobody could get at him.

PS: Yeah, they...

MW: You know, we heard about them.

PS: Yeah, they were over us quite a few times.

MW: Oh yeah?

PS: And again we noted their speed was so great...

MW: Oh sure.

PS: That they were, we thought, ineffective.

MW: Well that, the trouble was that they didn't, they could only be up for about ten, fifteen minutes. They had no capacity of fuel.

PS: Yeah. And at this point they were probably flying from the Autobahns.

MW: It could be because...

PS: Yeah, that's...

MW: We strafed, we..

PS: You hit all of the...

MW: ...hit all their airfields.

PS: I don't think they had an airfield left.

MW: Because I remember one mission I was on, I blew up a couple of planes on an airfield. So, I don't, so you're probably right. They were probably hidden somewhere in the ground.

PS: Right. Yeah, I think we've pretty much covered just about everything that...

MW: Yeah.

PS: ...relates to the Hol-...

MW: I have a couple of stories here and there, but really not worth talking about.

PS: Well, O.K., well Mr. Wasser, on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College, I want to thank you for granting us this interview. Your testimony will become a part of the Archive and preserved for history. You know we really feel that maybe a few hundred years from now there will be, well even today there are many students who are studying Holocaust. There are universities granting graduate degrees, even PhD's in Holocaust Studies.

MW: Well, the one thing I could tell you, while we were hunting around, after we were released, we went into some German homes. They asked us to come in there because they knew the Russians were on their way.

PS: Oh. They were scared.

MW: And they asked us to be there because...

PS: We had the same as ground troops. We had the same reaction.

MW: Sure.

PS: They were happy.

MW: Yeah, they asked us to stay there. I slept in a big, big bed, full of down. Oh it was beautiful.

PS: Well again I, we thank you. This tape and this testimony will become a permanent part of our Archive. And again on behalf of our personnel we thank you very, very much.

MW: Well, if I've contributed anything I'm glad to do it.

PS: Yeah, you certainly have. Thank you.

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