HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

DR. NINO DEPROPHETIS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: November 6, 1987

Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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ND - Dr. Nino deProphetis [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: November 6, 1987

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Philip G. Solomon, interviewing Dr. Nino deProphetis, November 6, 1987. Doctor, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

ND: Yes, my name is Nino deProphetis, D-E-, capital P-R-O-P-H-E-T-I-S. My army serial number is 0393786. We crossed the Channel in November of 1944 and quickly joined Patton's 3rd Army, at first to go south, but because of an emergency that had occurred north of us, the column was turned around, and within 24 hours after arrival we were involved in the Battle of the Bulge. At this time, I was in the 81st Armored Medical Battalion, which was a part of the 11th Armored Division, which at this time was assigned to Patton's 3rd Army.

PS: Do you recall, Doctor, at what date you first entered Germany, set foot on German soil?

ND: It was not until after the Battle of the Bulge, which lasted about two weeks. And then there was a time interval during which time we simply occupied the area and I would suspect that it was within six to eight weeks that Patton moved to the east, heading for, what are, is the, the big river?

PS: Oh, the Rhine River.

ND: The Rhine. Heading for the Rhine. It was--the travel was far more rapid than anybody anticipated. I think even Patton was surprised that he was able to move forward. And when we got to the Rhine we crossed it on pontoon bridges, at three different points, it all of which had already been established by one or two other armored divisions.

PS: When you...

ND: This was in early '4-...

PS: I'm sorry.

ND: Very early '45. That would have been the end of January or the first week or two in February that we were fighting on German soil.

PS: When you entered Germany, Doctor, did you know at that time of the existence of the particular concentration camp that you would liberate before you arrived there? If so, can you please tell us what you knew or had heard about it?

ND: At this point in time I would say that, at that time, we were not conscious of exactly what was going on. We had heard of concentration camps. We had heard of the violent antisemitism that the Nazis had demonstrated. But it was not until we eventually got to one of the concentration camps ourselves that we came to realize the brutality of it

all. There were so many things happening during combat that, aside from hearing about the existence of concentration camps and even extermination camps, we had had no personal experience with them and I doubt that we had any at that time, that we had any real conviction regarding the truth of the matter.

PS: Did you have any suspicion at that time of the mass murder of Jews and other, say political prisoners in Europe?

ND: We had heard rather brief remarks about such exterminations, but in war time, you hear so many rumors that we really had no direct knowledge. See, that came later. I did not know at that time.

PS: Can you please give the name of the camp that you liberated, and its location? Also the date, if possible, when you arrived at the campsite?

ND: Actually, we were traveling from Belgium and France, through Germany, in a generally southeasterly direction. Just before VE, Victory in Europe, or possibly one or two days after VE, I'm not positive about this, we were told that there was a camp which contained, which had been operated by the Germans, by the Nazis, and which contained, both which contained primarily Jewish inmates, but also political inmates of many races and from many countries. So this was the camp called Mauthausen, M-A-U-T-H-A-U-S-E-N. I was in the lead jeep at the time because I was part of the, because I was then C.O. of a medical battalion, having more recently been the executive officer. And as C.O. of the medical battalion, I led the contingent that was sent to Mauthausen to investigate. When we got there the gates were closed. But we saw above the gates at least a dozen inmates who were vigorous, and who looked in rather decent condition. They were all Spanish. And they all heralded the Allies as they spotted us. They had already heard the tanks rumbling one or two days before, but this group of Spanish inmates, all of them political prisoners, were ready to open the gates for us. And they jumped down from the structure above the gates and opened the gates wide. As we drove into the compound, the first stunning sight that greeted us was a pyramid of bodies, all of them completely naked, most of them obviously starved to death, period. We estimated that this primary pyramid in the courtyard, in the major courtyard, consisted of roughly six thousand humans. As we traveled around the camp, additional smaller piles of bodies were present. It was obvious that these bodies represented carcasses that the enemy had been unable to destroy completely through burning or burying. There was no sign of any Nazis. However, a few Hungarians had been left behind, especially a Hungarian doctor who was left to care for some of the inmates who had not yet died but who soon proceeded to die anyway because they were so far along. We were told that the Nazis had escaped the day before when they saw that the, that our arrival was imminent. I wasn't sure at first if, just what kind of a camp this was. But I concluded that at first it probably had been a labor camp, or a holding camp. But that once they, the Nazis found that it was difficult to feed them, they proceeded to exterminate them, either through starvation, which at least in the beginning probably was not intentional, but eventually they utilized to a great degree the gas chambers, of which I

personally saw two. The horrors around the camp in terms of dead bodies, liquid feces, over which no one had any control, was one of the most incredible sights I had ever seen, despite the fact that we had very, very recently been in combat.

PS: The general geographic location of the, this concentration camp, Doctor, Mauthausen, was, can you give the general geographic location?

ND: Yes it was above the city of Linz, on the, very close to the Danube River, Linz of course being on the Danube. And it was not far from the town of Urfahr, U-H-R-F-A-R-R. I'm not positive about the spelling of that but it was, we called it Urfahr, which was high up on the bluffs overlooking the Danube and Linz.

PS: That was in Austria?

ND: That was in, all of this was in Austria, yes.

PS: Yeah, yeah. Doctor, did your medical unit anticipate the number of survivors who would require medical attention? And were you equipped with sufficient medical supplies?

ND: We were equipped to handle only battle casualties. But help arrived rather quickly. In fact, too much help. Because food was rushed in and I'm sure that, that many of the survivors died from overfeeding. They had been starved for so long that they, that they were unable to handle a sudden appearance of the amount of food that they were able to truck in.

PS: Can you estimate how many prisoners were there in the camp and were there, you saw dead and approximately how many were still living?

ND: Well, we estimated 6,000 bodies in the first pyramid. There must have been throughout the camp an additional five or six thousand bodies, in much smaller clusters. Of the, of those still living, this is strictly a guess on my part, recollected 44 or 43 years later, but there must have been a couple of thousand still, still living, many of which died that first week we remained in camp.

PS: Of the survivors, did you examine all the survivors in the camp, or only those who came forward with complaints?

ND: Most of them were unable to even walk around. They were so starved that, and the pictures that I, that I'm turning over to you are evidence of the horrible condition of the survivors themselves.

PS: Is there any way that you could give a description of the overall medical condition of survivors?

ND: There, you had all grades of medical condition. Most of them were already dead. Obviously, many more had already been incinerated or buried. But then the more recent inmates were in excellent condition, like the dozen or so Spanish political prisoners who opened the gates for us. They had no trouble opening the gates. They could walk. They could move around. It all depended on how long they had been at the camp. But most of them, the vast majority, were in terrible condition.

PS: Would you say that most of the survivors suffered from extreme malnutrition?

ND: I would say that the two major causes of death among the dead and the dying was first of all malnutrition, and secondly disease of the, mostly of the gastrointestinal track. Diarrhea was rampant. They almost all had diarrhea. And I have a vivid recollection of some of the inmates who still could do some work, hauling liquid feces to a huge cistern which had been dug out.

PS: Could you give us a description of the psycholo-, the general psychological condition of the survivors?

ND: The term that would describe these people best was that they were beaten people, obviously defeated, with no spark except for the very recent inmates, like the Spanish contingent. They probably had not exhibited any hope for quite some time by the time we got there. Many of them were lying around, with ribs and skeletal bones very easily observed, flesh consisting primarily of skin, with no subcutaneous fat deposit.

PS: You mentioned, Doctor, that you were reinforced with other additional medical supplies and officers after your initial contact with the survivors. Approximately how many were with you when you first, that is medical officers or medical aid men when you first entered the camp?

ND: Our column consisted of only about 30 altogether.

PS: All medical?

ND: All part of the medical battalion. But there were also some officers from trains, division trains. And quickly we brought in help, and the evacuation of those who could still be salvaged was started. The immediate problem was that of disposing of the bodies. And on either the second or the third day, one of the medium tanks was equipped with a blade to excavate a trench. The blade was six feet wide, and the trench was dug to a depth of about six feet, for a total length of, as I am able to recall, it may be 300 feet. The bodies were then placed in the, in this trench, transversely, to utilize most of it. However, within a week orders were received from headquarters 3rd Army that the bodies would be exhumed and reburied in individual graves. This was signed by Patton and the reason for it later was explained that he wanted to make sure that the Austrians or Germans could never say that they had known nothing about it, and that they never saw these bodies and thereby deny any culpability. The orders also indicated that the work was to be done by the citizens. And that's the way that it was conducted. Citizens were brought in, the bodies were exhumed. By this time winter was well over. We were far into the spring, and it must have made a tremendous impression on the citizenry.

PS: So but the cemetery established for the reburial of the dead was within the same area?

ND: It was within the same area.

PS: That you knew?

ND: But I have never been back. Now whether they were again relocated into a larger area, I don't know.

PS: But as far as you know, they're in one cemetery that is identified as the victims of Mauthausen concentration camp?

ND: For that period of time.

PS: For that period of time.

ND: Whether there has been a change, I don't know.

PS: Doctor, going back to the living survivors, do you have any idea of how most of your patients fared after you treated them?

ND: Yes. Many of them died right under our nose, as we tried to feed them. Most GIs had a tendency to try to stuff them. And they were so weakened that they could not handle the overloading of food. So, that continued for several days. What happened to those that we evacuated to field hospitals, I don't know, because we stayed in this area for, in the region of Gmunden, for a considerable period of time.

PS: Were you able to communicate verbally with many of the survivors that you treated?

ND: We could talk to any of them. We could walk around with a...

PS: Well I mean was there a language barrier?

ND: Yes, but we had interpreters.

PS: Oh, oh, right. Do you recall what most of the survivors said or reported about how they were treated by the Germans, which probably is obvious?

ND: No, I really don't remember specifically getting that type of information. I just assumed that with so many dead, and with the condition of the survivors, that the treatment must have been horrendous. It was such an obvious conclusion that I don't recall even discussing it with them.

PS: When you treated the survivors individually, did they have any emotional reaction to your, to contact with you, and the fact that you, after all the indescribable treatment they were receiving, that here was a fellow human being that was treating them and trying to save them? Was there any emotional reaction to that?

ND: The outstanding emotional reaction that I recall was one of joy over seeing us, or probably of seeing anybody other than those who had kept them within the confines of that camp.

PS: Can you describe your emotional feelings when you first saw, when you first observed this sight, and did your emotions or feelings change at all during the time you spent with them?

ND: One of the outstanding reactions that I had was, well, obviously everything we'd gone through in this war was not in vain if this is an example of what has been done to these people. Then, the war itself was the only possible solution. That was one of my main reactions. The other obvious reaction was one of total shock at the treatment, at this type of treatment, of one human being by another.

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

ND: I suddenly got the impression that this was primarily Jews. But it was obvious that others were there. Whether it was originally just for Jews, later becoming mixed, I'm not sure. But I know that at the time of the liberation that there were many groups. We, the vast majority were Jews, but I mentioned the small group of Spaniards who opened the gates for us. I know for sure that the physician who appears in one of my pictures which I am turning over to you, was Hungarian. And there were many Hungarian political prisoners.

PS: He was there, this physician that you mention, as an inmate who also was serving...

ND: Right.

PS: …as the physician?

ND: He was an inmate who looked a little bit better than the other inmates, but not by much.

PS: Now the other Hungarians that were there also were there as inmates, not guards? They were there...

ND: No, they were there as inmates.

PS: Right.

ND: Yes.

PS: Did they also look maybe a little bit better or...

ND: It's hard for me to say at this time. Some groups looked better than others.

PS: But outside of the few Spanish and the small handful of Hungarians, you were not aware of any other nationality groups that were there in any large numbers?

ND: Not specifically, but I know that there were more of them, a half a dozen...

PS: Out of the thousands...

ND: ...nationalities.

PS: Out of the thousands.

ND: Out of the thousands, yes.

PS: Doctor, were there any children? Did you observe any children there?

ND: Not children, no, but I, we saw a lot of young men, a lot of teenagers.

PS: Were they kept together as a group or were their parents, were their families, say these...

ND: They had been so completely neglected of late, for example, within the last several weeks, that they all roamed around. I didn't know where they lived even. I think they were just roaming around this enclosure, this huge enclosure, with no purpose, no direction, and no guidance, because the Nazis had escaped. I did not see a single Nazi...

PS: No.

ND: …after opening the camp.

PS: Were you given any responsibilities in arranging for the transfer and care of prisoners?

ND: Yes, because that is the function of a medical battalion of a division, to treat the wounded and evacuate others. So, our ambulances served a help in the evacuation and trains, division trains brought up the two-and-a-half-ton trucks to transport a lot of the others.

PS: Did you, did the experience…

Tape one, side two:

PS: So did the experience of seeing the prisoners have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

ND: Yes, it had a very definite experience, to which I already alluded in answering a previous question. However, we might discuss it a little bit further. At no time during the entire war did I ever have any doubt whatsoever about the purpose of the war. But seeing the conditions at Mauthausen certainly fortified all of my feelings. At this point I might also add that during my four-and-a-half years in World War I [World War II] I never heard or almost never heard anyone complain about why we were at war against Germany. I'm speaking now, I'm referring only to the GIs. Morale was never a problem among our troops. And I think the results of the war are indicative of that.

PS: Would you say that the reaction of other men in your unit was much the same as your reaction? Did you talk with many of them afterwards about what you had experienced?

ND: We discussed it almost constantly after liberating the camp, and at, today I would have to say that we were all one reaction. Whether there were others who felt differently and I do not understand how anyone could have felt differently, certainly the soldiers and the officers with whom I was in close contact had a similar reaction.

PS: How long did you remain in the camp?

ND: In the camp itself, we really only stayed about two weeks. But, we remained in the area for an additional six months, as the occupation force. In the beginning, we were members of the combat troops. We were combat soldiers. But rather quickly, I would say that maybe within a total of one month, the division, which had been in combat formation, was gradually and rather quickly dispersed so that each battalion commander was given a different city of occupation, but all within the greater area of Gmunden, which is not far from Salzburg. I personally was made the, was placed in charge. By I, I mean I and my medical battalion, although still remaining a part of the 11th Armored Division, whose headquarters was in Gmunden. I was made Bürgermeister [Mayor] of Attersee, A-T-T-E-R-S-E-E, which was both a summer and winter resort on the Lake of Attersee.

PS: During the two weeks that you remained at Mauthausen, did you continue to treat the survivors there, or were, by then had they been transferred to another point for treatment?

ND: No, by that time they had all been transferred and the dead had been buried and there was nothing further to be done there.

PS: At that time were you aware that this was just one of many death camps, or did you--what was your thinking at that time?

ND: I had heard the, I'm almost positive that I had heard of Dachau, but I'm not sure of any other camps that I might have heard of.

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

ND: Not in my own mind I cannot determine that, but having read *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, the reasons for it became a little more obvious. That the--there were two factors behind it, one was the bellicose and belligerent history of the German mind. And secondly, the violent antisemitism which was ingrained in the German mind and unfortunately in many other minds for many, many generations. I am convinced, even after reading William L. Shirer's book, that under Hitler, the Germans pounced on antisemitism as a logical and functioning excuse to accomplish what they wanted to do.

PS: Do you know if there was a regimental history, or in this case a history within your medical battalion that included this experience?

ND: No, there was no history within my battalion.

PS: Later did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of concentration camps?

ND: No, this was the only group that I was exposed to, and I don't recall any of them ever remarking that they favored what had been brought about in this camp.

PS: Did any of the prisoners that you treated and liberated ever contact you or your unit?

ND: Yes, I heard from two of them, whose names I no longer have. But this, this was immediately after the war. But I did contact a Jewish German professor whose daughter and wife I came to know well in Attersee. I set up, on becoming, on taking over military control of the town of Attersee and the environment, one of the first things I did was to set up a school in which English was taught in the town of Attersee. And a young lady of about eighteen or nineteen came forward. She spoke English extremely well. In fact she had under her arm a volume of one of Hemmingway's novels. I don't recall which one it was. But she told me that she would like very much to teach English to any of the local inhabitants. She said, "I've only been here two weeks myself." She said, "My mother and I have walked all the way from Vienna over a period of several months." How they got through the lines, I don't know. "My other request is that I would appreciate your establishing contact with my father, who is in the United States. He escaped when Hitler came in." And that was the only clue that I had, that maybe it was a Jewish family. The clue that she gave me was that he had come to America just in time to get out of Vienna and the last she heard was that he was professor of chemistry at the University of Chicago. So, I wrote to him at the University of Chicago, and eventually, because the only mail operating at that time was the military mail, I received a reply from him, but from Baltimore. He had been transferred as professor of chemistry to Johns Hopkin University in Baltimore. After the war I called him, and had him come to Chester, Pennsylvania...

PS: Oh, I see.

ND: ...where I lived at the time. He was a fine gentleman. He was very appreciative of what little we were able to do for his family.

PS: I suppose when you wrote to him, probably that was the first he knew that his daughter and any of his loved ones had survived.

ND: Well, I don't know how much he found out, because I simply forwarded. I told her, his daughter, that I would forward anything to him, uncensored. We didn't censor any of that. There was no reason to.

PS: Yeah.

ND: The war was over. So I'm sure that very quickly he found out everything. I did know that during the war he had already lost a son, who was in the German Army. He had been forced into the German Army. He was 23 years old, and had been a concert pianist.

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

ND: Six months.

PS: Six months.

ND: I remained with the Army of Occupation for six months, despite the fact that having been in the Army throughout, for four-and-a-half years, that I was eligible to leave the European theater. But I was still in possession of all the vehicles, over a hundred ambulances and other vehicles within the battalion. And it wasn't until I was able to, in the woods of, just outside of Nuremberg, no, of Munich rather, the outside of Munich, was I able to turn all the vehicles over to a second lieutenant. And I was then able to come home with the 7th Armored Division.

PS: Doctor, at the end of the war, and the six months that you continued serving in Europe, and then returned home and reentered civilian life, do you think you would have had the same feelings about the war had you not been an eye witness to this, the terrible slaughter and the death camp at Mauthausen?

ND: I am positive that my experience at Mauthausen had a profound effect on me. It certainly rendered impossible not believing the main purpose behind the Holocaust itself. It must have had a, in fact, I know that it had an effect on me that I will carry to my grave. And how anyone could deny the existence of a persecution of the Jews during that period, is beyond me.

PS: Would you like to add anything additional, Doctor, to your testimony?

ND: Yes, I would like to wind up with a, my general impression of what happened in World War II. Despite my hatred of war, I am very happy that I had an opportunity to do what little I was able to contribute. But historically speaking, the importance of World War II, aside from defeating the enemy, is the record of what certain men are capable of doing to other people in the universe. I doubt that there is a limit to that capacity. I think that's about all I have to say.

PS: Dr. deProphetis, I thank you very much. Your testimony I'm sure will contribute tremendously to Holocaust historical archives. Thank you very much.