

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

WILLIAM MCCORMICK

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: January 11, 1988

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Melrose Park, PA 19027

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WM- William McCormick [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: January 11, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. William McCormick. The date is January the 11th, 1988. Bill, can you please tell us where in Europe, and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of the concentration camp?

WM: I was in the 15th Recon group attached to 7th Army headquarters.

PS: Did you know of the existence of this particular camp that you would liberate before you arrived there?

WM: No I didn't.

PS: You knew nothing at all about its existence.

WM: No, I knew nothing about it.

PS: Before you arrived at the camp, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of political prisoners and Jews in Europe? If so, can you please describe what you knew?

WM: To be honest with you, I really didn't, I can't recall ever knowing about it.

PS: You knew that people were disappearing, that political prisoners and say Jewish people were being rounded up...

WM: Oh yeah.

PS: But you didn't know what was being done with them.

WM: No, I thought that they were in labor forces fixing the highways and roads. That's about all I knew about them.

PS: Yeah. Can you please give the name of the camp that you liberated, and its location?

WM: It was Dachau, I think, called Dachau Prison Camp. And it was on the road to Munich. That's about all I can tell you. That's it.

PS: Yeah. Can you remember approximately the date that you arrived at the camp?

WM: No, I couldn't. Nope, I couldn't tell you. I really couldn't.

PS: Yeah, I think, I was in that area myself, and I believe the liberation of Dachau was somewhere around, I think around the 1st of May, 1945.

WM: As far as I, as far as I can recall, it was in that area, you know. But as far as the exact date I couldn't tell you.

PS: Yeah. To the best of your memory, can you please describe what you saw at the camp, and what you felt at the time?

WM: Well, when I first went into the camp, the first thing I saw was people walking around and they looked like skeletons. And you could look like, you could almost

imagine, you could see through them. They were so thin, and they looked like zombies walkin' around. And you couldn't believe that a human being could be so thin, and still be on its feet. We had orders not to give them no cigarettes, no candy, or nothin'. And I tell you it was a terrible, terrible sight to see them poor people like that.

PS: Can you estimate how many prisoners there were, if any of them were dead, and if you were able to save any that were near death?

WM: Well, I imagine, I'd say there was approximately, I'm just sayin' real figures about 100 people. We could see that they didn't, that they haven't, that they didn't take to medical as of yet. And as far as bodies, I couldn't estimate how many I seen in boxcars. I'd say there was 25 boxcars just full with bodies that were just laying there. And they threw lime on these people to keep the smell down. It didn't help too much. You could st--the odor was still terrible. And I had a, I'd say there was, I couldn't estimate, but there was thousands of people dead there. It was terrible.

PS: Thousands of dead and possibly, you think just about maybe 100 that were survivors?

WM: Well, of what I seen. Now I came in the day after that they had liberated the camp. And I would say that I don't know how many they had already taken away, taken to hospitals, but the ones that I seen were, I couldn't tell you how many they took away.

PS: Had you been assigned any responsibilities in arranging for the transfer and care of prisoners?

WM: No, I did not. I was, actually I was just on, I was on recon and when we heard of the c--when I heard of the camp we--I was a Buck Sergeant--and myself and another fellow went there. And we had to write a report out of what we seen and turned it over to the, to our commanding officer. And we stayed there, I stayed there for two days. And I was only too glad to get out of there.

PS: Bill, you mentioned boxcars that were filled with bodies that had been treated with lime? Those bodies, do you have any idea whether these boxcars had been bringing these people in, or whether they were evacuating?

WM: No, these bodies were from the gas chambers that they had there. They had a building, it was a one-story building, and the boxcars came up as far as I can remember on the opposite side of the building. And these people would come up and take their clothes off, thinking that they were gonna get a shower, I imagine. I guess that's what they told them. And then they would close the door and gas them. I imagine they was gassin' like 100 at a time.¹ And the fellow told me there that they had a system where they just sucked the gas back in the, back out so they could use it again, and just--And, in this building you wouldn't believe that a human being could scratch a wall with his fingers and put imprints in the cement in the wall, like trying to dig themselves out. And there were imprints of their

¹According to the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Vol. 1*, in Dachau there was no mass extermination program with poison gas. There was a crematorium. (pp.340-341) In 1942 a gas chamber was built, but it was not put into use. (p.342)

hands were in the wall. You couldn't believe a human being could do that. But that's how frightened I guess the poor people were when they were gettin' gassed.

PS: I heard that.

WM: You understand?

PS: I mean what you describe. Yeah, it was fact. I, of course I've heard it. Were there, in other words there were no ovens, crematorial ovens in Dachau?

WM: Oh yes.

PS: Oh there were?

WM: They had, they, I don't know how many they had. Like it wasn't an oven as far as I'm concerned. It was a, just a big pit fire, furnace, and as I understand it there was a man, there was a guard behind the door when the people walked in. They hit them with a mallet, and two guys would grab them and throw them right in the oven. And, as far as I know, when I came there there was boxes outside of these places I would say, I don't know how many was there, a dozen or a half a dozen. And they were full with ashes. And the guy told me that they're ashes of human beings. And how many is in one of them boxes they couldn't estimate. I, of all these years I remember, I have, I had three hats, well they were like, they were tahzes [phonetic, probably fez] like the Lulu Temple people wear, and I think they call them tahzes, and that's for the ex--I had three of those, and they were what they call the executioners hats. And I have never heard nothin' about 'em in all them years, and on the hat it had the swastika and crossbones.² And I don't know anybody, I have never heard of anybody talking about them. But I had three of them, and whatever happened to them, I, when I left my outfit a fellow was gonna send a box of my souvenirs home that I never did get them. So I don't know whatever happened to them. But, they would be some piece to have today.

PS: They actually were hats that were used by the executioners with a combination of swastika, skull and crossbones, and...

WM: Yes, right. And it is terrible that you know, that I never heard nothing about it. That's what really gets me. You know, I, anybody I ever talked to, and they never heard of them.

PS: Can you describe the reactions of the prisoners at the point of liberation when you entered Dachau?

WM: Well, they just walked around and they didn't know, it looked like they didn't know what day it was and, they were so pathetic. It's hard to describe what they, they just, they looked like they were zombies. They were just walking around in a fog. That's all I can tell you.

PS: And their physical condition certainly must have been very, very low and...

² Death's Head or *Totenkopf* [Skull and crossbones] was symbol of the SS unit which served as guards in concentration camps. [www.adl.org]

WM: You couldn't believe that a human body could be as thin as them people. All you could see was, they like, the skin just hangin' on bones. And they, and the look in their eyes. They just didn't know what was goin' on.

PS: Did you or others in your unit, or others who you observed, American troops, come prepared with food and medical supplies?

WM: Oh yes, they had it, they had, the medics were one of the first called in there, but we wasn't allowed to give them people a cigarette or a candy bar or nothin'. And, you felt like giving them something, but you couldn't. If you gave them a candy bar, you're liable to kill them. They had to give them--I don't know how they ever got them back to being normal again, but they did. I have seen some of the people afterwards that were in them camps. You know, years later you heard them talking. And you couldn't believe that they would be the same people.

PS: Now we did hear that they had to be brought along very, very slowly. In the beginning when they first fed them, many, many died while they were being treated or while they were being fed. When you entered the camp, were there any German guards or other guards still left within the camp when you arrived?

WM: Well, they had, as far as I know that they had rounded up the guards that were still there. But I understand some of the inmates naturally--I understood that they killed about a half a dozen of them, which I couldn't blame them. Heh, for the way they were treated, my God, you wouldn't treat a dog. I can't believe that another human being could treat another human being like them poor people were treated.

PS: You mentioned about all the bodies, the bodies, the carcasses that were in the boxcars. Did you also see in walking through the camp, did you also see bodies that were scattered around the camp that hadn't been gathered up as...

WM: No, well, I do remember they had a big, when I got there they had a big pile of bodies they had put up on the side. Wherever they came from I couldn't tell ya. But they were all just like skeletons and what they were gonna do then, I didn't stay there, but as I understood they were gonna have a mass burial for all these people. I don't know how they could bury the poor people unless they did it all in just dig a big hole and put them all in it.

PS: Yeah. Mass graves.

WM: Right.

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

WM: Yeah, well, I tell ya, it took me a long time to even think about likin' German people. I couldn't believe that the German people didn't know that that was goin' on. I can't, when you're talking about millions of people being killed and, I understand before we got to Dachau, that they had killed at least, I, I'm gonna estimate it, the people said that three or four days before we got there that they killed about 30,000 people. Now can you believe they could do something like that?

PS: You did say 30,000?

WM: 30,000 they said they killed in about a week before the American troops got there, trying to get rid of them.

PS: Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? Did you talk with them afterwards about the experience?

WM: Yeah, well, most of the guys felt the same way as I did. I guess they, that the--I really hated the German people. But, then I guess you start to think and you think, "Well, maybe they didn't know." And, it was pretty hard to find, to believe that all of them didn't know. Some of them knew. There were a lot of them had to know. They had to see them bod--people coming in there and never coming out. So, I don't know what, how you could explain it, but I know that I was awful hateful at the time. And I was only 22 years old, so I guess time heals everything.

PS: How long did you remain in the Dachau Concentration Camp after the, well, how many days did you remain there?

WM: I was only there two days, two full days.

PS: Now, from what you've said, obviously the experience lingered with you after you left.

WM: It sure did. I'll tell ya. I guess being young you try to forget, but I'm now 65, and that's a long time ago, and I sure do, every once in a while you wonder about your experiences and how you ever got over it. The cruelty of one person to another, you couldn't, I don't know, I couldn't do it. I know that.

PS: Bill, were you aware when you, now, until you entered Dachau, which was only, oh, I believe it was about three weeks before the end of the war. The war, after all those years, the war was almost over. Up until the time that you saw Dachau, were you, you were not, I believe you did say that you were not aware that there was such a thing as these death camps, the concentration camps.

WM: No, I really, I really and truly, I truly can't say that I was. I now, this has been so long ago, but I really don't think that I ever thought of it like that. I thought that they built them highways, them beautiful highways they had in Germany, by the prisoners. I thought that they'd done all that, and that's what they were doing with them. As far as, but as far as being exterminating them, I figured that maybe they killed a few people, like, but nothing, God Almighty, nothing like I saw.

PS: Now after you did see Dachau, were you aware that this was only one of many concentration camps?

WM: Yes. We found that out later. You know, I found that out later that it was only, that Dachau was only a small one as far as I know and, if that was a small one, God help, what are the big ones.

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

WM: No. The only thing I can say is that the leaders must have been mad men to try to exterminate the amount of people that they did.

PS: After you left Dachau, was there any official or unofficial meeting of your unit to discuss what you had experienced at the camp?

WM: No there wasn't.

PS: Do you know if there was any regimental history that included this experience?

WM: I personally don't know of any.

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

WM: Yeah, every once in a while you met a guy in a bar havin' a beer or something, and he said that he was in Buchenwald, or he went to Buchenwald or something like that. But I, that's, as far as their names, I cannot recall them.

PS: Did you have any idea of the number of camps, or the number of prisoners in captivity?

WM: No, only thing I, we would, heard, what was just hearsay, you know, like the amount of people that were exterminated, like, I think it was between four and six million or something like that.

PS: Do you have any recollection as to when you first heard of the mass gassing as you just mentioned, that you did hear later the figure of four to six million Jews who were gassed.

WM: I guess...

PS: Do you recall...

WM: I guess it was right after the war, waitin' to be discharged, talkin' to fellows in camp, you know. And talking about our experiences. And to tell you the truth, I know, I have ten children and I don't think I have discussed it twice with any of them. I don't like to bring them kind of things up.

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

WM: Oh, I was there, I was one of the few soldiers that got, that had, got home on recuperation leave early in, early that year. I was home for 30 days, right before the Battle of the Bulge. And naturally when I came back [phone rings; tape off then on] I came back I, naturally, they were gonna keep me there, because I was already home. So I stayed till about, I think it was the end of July, and then I came home and was discharged. Because I was in the service almost a year before the war had started, and that's about it.

PS: The end of July, that would have been, you were there about two months...

WM: Yes.

PS: After the German surrender.

WM: Yeah, that's right.

PS: Do you think that you would have the same feelings about the war if you had not been an eyewitness to the Nazi atrocities?

WM: No, I don't think I would have. I would have thought that it was just a war, you know. I would never have thought about something like that. I don't believe anybody

in their right mind could even think that anybody could do something like that to another human being, whether if you were Black, White, Pink, or what you are! And I can't see how anybody could do such things.

PS: Bill, we've reached the end of the list of questions. Would you like to add anything at all to your testimony?

WM: No I, that's about all I can recall I guess. The only thing I can say is [pause] it's a great, it's a good thing that we won the war, or I guess we'd all be in death camps. Heh, God, it'd be terrible.

PS: Bill, thank you very, very much for your very valuable testimony. Thank you.