

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JOHN IGOE

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: October 22, 1990

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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JI - John Igoe [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: October 22, 1990

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, interviewing Mr. John Igoe, for the Gratz College Oral History Archive. The date is October 22, 1990. [tape off then on] Mr. Igoe, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving?

JI: I was with the 392nd Field Artillery Battalion, and I was Assistant Supply Officer and we were part of the 7th Army. I was also, it was the, basically I should say the 42nd Rainbow Division which is part of the 7th Army.

PS: You landed on the beach in France?

JI: I landed in Marseilles.

PS: Oh, the southern route.

JI: And we came up the Rhone Valley to...

PS: Yeah.

JI: Nancy, Dijon, and La Petit Pierre is where we jumped off for the final move into Germany.

PS: You entered Germany in what area?

JI: We entered Germany in what was called the redoubt. And I entered Germany as far as my memory would, would be, I think we, in Rosenheim. I think we entered Germany in Rosenheim. And then we came through Schweinfurt, Nürnberg, and that whole area in southern Germany.

PS: When you were going through France and entered into Germany, at that time did you know of the existence of concentration camps, or did you know of the existence of the particular camp that you would eventually liberate?

JI: No, I did not. No, I did not.

PS: Did you see any evidence, say in your advance through France, up through, from Marseilles, did you at that time see any evidence of German atrocities against French civilians or prisoners of war?

JI: No, I did not. No, sir.

PS: After entering Germany, did you see anything, before arriving at the concentration camp area, did you see anything of liberated prisoners of war or liberated slave labor?

JI: No, I don't think I was aware of anything like that at the time. However, I do recall any number of people in carts and in wagons, in horses and wagons, coming to the American lines. And in one instance I suppose I would have to say that this man and his children were probably fleeing from some sort of persecution.

PS: Yeah. Do you think they had been in a slave labor camp?

Jl: That I don't know...

PS: [unclear]

Jl: I can't say for sure, Phil. I can't say for sure.

PS: What was their general physical condition?

Jl: Oh they were healthy.

PS: Oh.

Jl: Yeah, they were healthy.

PS: Again, Jack, before you arrived at the concentration camp that you eventually liberated, had you heard anything at that time about the mass murder of Jews, political prisoners and all others?

Jl: I was aware that there were such places. However, not too much was said about it in conversation. I was aware of it, and I think the men who I served with were aware of it. Never knowing that, never knowing that we would come upon it, I suppose.

PS: And that time you certainly, if you heard anything about it, did you have reason to visualize it on the scale that you later saw and that you later read about?

Jl: No. I had no idea...

PS: No.

Jl: It would be like that, no, no idea.

PS: Now, after you entered Germany, at that point did you, at that time see anything at all, any evidence of Nazi atrocities against humanity?

Jl: Nothing until we came into Dachau.

PS: Yeah. Prior to your, I guess I asked you this, about, in Germany had you, did you see then displaced persons, slave laborer or liberated prisoners of war in Germany itself?

Jl: No, only just what I mentioned here a few minutes ago, Phil.

PS: Yeah.

Jl: That was about all.

PS: So really, up until the time you arrived at the concentration camp, at that site, you really had no reason to suspect that there had been a Holocaust on the scale that you later saw and read?

Jl: No, I knew it existed but I had no idea it was on the...

PS: Now...

Jl: Scale that we discovered.

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

Jl: Well we came through the town of Dachau, it seems to me around noon time on the 28th of April, and it seems to me that that was Palm Sunday. And I was in a Jeep and the town was swarming with thousands of people, all in striped uniforms, in striped prison garb. And one man stuck his head in the Jeep and he threw his arms around

me. And I remember distinctly what he said, "Today, my friend, you have made me very, very happy." And, there were so many of these poor people.

PS: Was he speaking in English?

Jl: He spoke in English, yes. He spoke in English, Phil. He spoke in English.

PS: Do you know or do you recall what he might have been? Nationality or...

Jl: No, I, I, I really wasn't paying that close attention. It was broken English, certainly, but I have no idea whether, what nationality he was.

PS: Now this was the town of Dachau.

Jl: This was the town of Dachau.

PS: And at that point you didn't realize that just a few miles outside of Dachau that this horrible site that you would later see, the concentration camp of Dachau?

Jl: I had no idea what I would see the next day, the next morning.

PS: This, you say was April 28th?

Jl: April 28th and 29th, to the best of my recollection, 1945.

PS: Yeah, then the next day you arrived at the site itself of the concentration camp?

Jl: Well, our supply depot was set up close to the concentration camp and this gave me an opportunity the next day to, to see Dachau, because our supply depot was in the proximity of Dachau.

PS: Now, can you describe what you saw on entering? Well, first the, you mentioned thousands that were in the town of Dachau, that evidently were prisoners that had walked out of the camp upon liberation.

Jl: Exactly.

PS: Can you describe the physical appearance, the physical condition of these people?

Jl: Well, as I recall, those who were in the town were, were walking. I suppose only the healthy ones, or those that appeared healthy, were the only ones who could walk. And there were many who were sitting on the side, on the curb, and keep in mind we were in convoy at that time, so that we would stop for a minute or maybe ten seconds or two or three minutes, and we would move on. I didn't stay out of the convoy, didn't move out of the convoy.

PS: Yeah then, the next day you arrived at the site of..

Jl: Yeah, the next...

PS: The concentration camp of Dachau.

Jl: The next day I arrived at the concentration site at Dachau. And the approach somehow reminded me of the Philadelphia Navy Yard. There were homes, I would call them Cape Cod type of homes, just outside of the concentration camp, with beautiful flowers around. And I was talking to a German man and a woman, and I asked them something to the effect that, "Didn't you know what was happening here?" And their answer was they didn't know what was happening. And I suppose I can understand that,

for fear of their own lives I would imagine. When we went into Dachau, there were boxcars of human bodies that had been machine-gunned down possibly the day before as the Allied troops were advancing, as the 42nd Division was advancing. And these bodies were still in boxcars, just piles of almost charwood, in boxcars, skinny hands and skinny legs. And there were machine gun bullets, bullet holes through each boxcar. I would imagine the Nazis figured that they didn't want these people to be alive when the Allies got there, when the Allied soldiers got there, so they just mowed them down. I would say the shots in the boxcars were perhaps two feet, maybe two or three feet from the bottom of the car, so as to hit people if they were standing in the abdomen or the chest. We found one man still alive in one of these boxcars. The stench was awful. Later that day, we saw the ovens, where they claim, history claims that they did not use the ovens at Dachau, they used the ovens elsewhere. But we saw the ovens that were there, and any number of, any number of other areas that I suppose where they abused people. I spent perhaps an hour there, maybe an hour-and-a-half, and then I never went back. And I never, I never went back after the one visit. I didn't go back. I would imagine that day, the next, certainly within a few hours after we were there, that the corpses were removed and the boxcars were removed out of Dachau. But it was a complex, a big complex just dedicated to murder and to atrocities. Being in the artillery, I naturally wasn't there in the early hours of the liberation. I would have to assume that the infantry came through, Phil, in the morning or the night before. Time dims your memory. The only thing that I can be sure of is that I came through there on the 28th and then I came through again on the 29th. And after that I, I never went back.

PS: Yeah. Jack, after the horrible site that you saw of the bodies within the boxcars, did you see additional bodies strewn around the camp? In barracks buildings or on the grounds or...

JJ: No, I didn't. The only other bodies I saw were SS men who apparently had been killed by our infantry. So I didn't see any other bodies around the camp, no.

PS: There were no living Germans? Did you see any German guards who were still...

JJ: No.

PS: [unclear]

JJ: No German guards...

PS: That had been captured?

JJ: No, no German guards by that time. The Americans were patrolling, the infantry, or the military police, one or the other, were in charge by this time and they were doing the patrolling. There wasn't a great deal of order the day after we came through, on the 29th. There wasn't a great deal of order. Nobody was, it didn't seem as though anybody was totally in charge by that time, so that we were free to walk through and look at whatever we wanted to look at.

PS: Were there many prisoners, living prisoners that you saw within Dachau at that time, at the time of liberation? Any prisoners alive?

Jl: I don't think, no, I don't recall. I, Phil, I don't recall, I guess most of them were...

PS: Had already...

Jl: Had already...

PS: [unclear]

Jl: They were just, the poor buggers were so glad to get out of there, you know, they were all milling around the town.

PS: Among the living that you saw in the town, and among the dead you saw within the camp, did you see, Jack, any children, alive or dead?

Jl: No, I did not. No. I didn't see any children.

PS: No children.

Jl: No. This is not to say there weren't children, but I didn't see any.

PS: Now, were you there long enough to have been assigned any duties in connection with prisoners living, or in the disposal of the others?

Jl: I was not assigned any duties with the prisoners. However, I did have the responsibility of furnishing cleaning and preserving materials and food to a displaced persons camp. And I would, I would assume that some of these people had been prisoners of Dachau.

PS: Or...

Jl: By this time they had...

PS: [unclear]

Jl: Didn't have their prison garb on.

PS: Yeah.

Jl: And it's very likely that I had come in contact with a lot of these people but not knowing that they were prisoners of Dachau. But there were any number of displaced persons camps...

PS: Yeah.

Jl: In southern Germany and in Austria.

PS: So those you saw of course in the town of Dachau were still in a prison uniform.

Jl: They were still in a prison uniform...

PS: And...

Jl: Garb, filthy dirty, filthy dirty.

PS: Was anyone there equipped to take care of them? In other words, for those who required feeding, medical attention?

Jl: Well, I would imagine that the infantry medics probably would take care of that, and possibly some of the medics in the 42nd Division, the 392nd Field Artillery, some of the medics would have taken care of that. But I was not aware of that. But I would have to assume that that's what happened.

PS: Before you saw the site in Dachau, your first was seeing the living survivors.

Jl: Yes.

PS: Before you arrived there, say the day before, or the hours before, did you know what you were going to see? Had you heard any reports, radio or instructions or missions?

Jl: We had reports that Dachau had been liberated by the, by the 7th Army, and by the 42nd Rainbow Division. We had heard reports of that several hours before. I had attended a meeting earlier that morning.

PS: Then your unit was not actually equipped with food or medical supplies for these people, for the living?

Jl: No.

PS: Did the experience of seeing this horrible sight of the emaciated prisoners have any effect on your feeling about being a part of the war and fighting Germany?

Jl: Well, I guess it made me proud to the fact that we had helped liberate these people. I suppose as a young man I had distaste for the Germans having started the war. It certainly didn't endear me to them, that's for sure.

PS: In other words you realized then, you, before seeing that, not to put words in your mouth, but from the time the war started and then you entered the army, you knew what you were fighting for.

Jl: Oh yes, no question.

PS: And after seeing this sight, I guess you also knew what you were fighting against.

Jl: Exactly.

PS: These horrible monsters.

Jl: Exactly.

PS: The reaction of other men in your unit I imagine was pretty much the same as your reaction?

Jl: I would say it was the same as mine. We were all appalled, you know, that such a thing like this could happen.

PS: At this time, having seen this example of inhumanity, did you in your wildest dreams just imagine that this was only one of many and it was really not one of the primary death camps?

Jl: Well, I knew it was one of many. I didn't know to what extreme one was more horrible than the other. I, I have found out since, of course, that Dachau was one of the earliest of the concentration camps built. Before the war broke out they had 25-, as I understand from what I've read there were approximately 2500 people in there before the war even broke out.

PS: Probably political...

Jl: Political and religious.

PS: Yeah, and...

Jl: And religious...

PS: Yeah.

JJ: Political and religious prisoners of war, certainly.

PS: Now, you say that you only, you stayed approximately what, about 24 hours at Dachau?

JJ: Well I guess that would be, be fair enough. We were, we were bivouacked outside of the town. And I would say that I was in and out of Dachau, yes, and all over in 24 hours. The second day, Phil, I saw more than I did the first day, because the first day I was in convoy, and the first day I only saw all these poor buggers who had been liberated and who were walking around the town aimlessly.

PS: Before you left, did you observe anything being done to house them and feed them?

JJ: No, I did not. It wasn't part of my responsibility. I did not.

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

JJ: Ooh boy, I don't, I--sick people I suppose, Phil. Sick people. Who would, who would set up a concentration camp, you know? Except a mad man, and mad people. But you know as you live, as you grow older and you say, "How could adult men click their heels and raise their hands and say 'Heil Hitler'?"

PS: They worshipped. They worshipped.

JJ: They worshipped. They worshipped. They're just, well, they're great nationalists. They're great nationalists, the Germans. And how could, how they could ever buy something like that of "Heil Hitler", it's beyond my wildest comprehension.

PS: Yeah, I've read that, that actually Ger-, Hitler was, eventually dreamed that he was gonna become a German deity, that he would be a god among the German people.

JJ: Oh I'm sure, I'm sure.

PS: And he lies in a, his ashes lie in an unmarked grave. Do you know if, has any, anything been written in your regimental history of, of Dachau, the experience of your unit?

JJ: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure there is. I'm glad you asked me that. Last, last July at our national reunion, of the Rainbow Division's national reunion, a man was appointed to be responsible in looking into the histories of Dachau and I'll get you his name. I'll get you his name. As a matter of fact, I'm, I have to write to him here in the next couple of weeks. I don't know him.

PS: The Rainbow Division of course being the 42nd Infantry...

JJ: Correct.

PS: Division.

JJ: Correct.

PS: Were there any official, like any kind of a meeting within your unit to discuss what you had seen at Dachau?

JJ: Not at my level, no, not at my level.

PS: You couldn't...

JJ: Any discussion we had, Phil, was among ourselves.

PS: Right. The same with, who would have, what, in combat there wasn't time to hold...

JJ: No. [both chuckle]

PS: Regimental meetings.

JJ: Darn right there wasn't.

PS: When did you, I guess I asked something that would border on this. When did you first hear of the gassing of prisoners, the large-scale gassing?

JJ: Well, I suppose not until we got pretty close to Dachau. As you've just said, everything happened so fast, you know? And not until we got close to liberating Dachau did we hear too much about the gassing.

PS: You know, when you mention the 28th and 29th of...

JJ: Of April.

PS: April, of 1945...

JJ: '45.

PS: As being the liberation of Dachau, and it was only a few days before that that you really heard of the large-scale concentration camps. Then when you relate that to the fact that that was only like a week or ten days before the end of the war, we had the same experience, and it's, to me it's hard to reconcile the fact that here we didn't know anything, you know, my outfit, until the day before you speak of. We were to, a little to the west of where you were, and were involved in Landsberg and what struck me is something almost unbelievable was that really the major concentration camps were not known or discovered until really just a week or so before the total end, the total end of the war.

JJ: Exactly.

PS: Just a few other...

JJ: They were known to exist, but we didn't get to them till all, the war was almost over.

PS: Well, now we, I, I don't think we really knew too much of the existence. We s-, now I'm giving a little of my experience, but, we knew that people, Jewish people, Gypsies, political prisoners and many, many others, Jewish and non-Jewish, were being herded into boxcars and shipped out. But we, we thought up until that point that most of them were heading for slave labor, or to displaced, to areas where they were gonna be used in factories as slave laborers.

JJ: Yeah, but history shows that there were about 2500 Catholic priests in Dachau.

PS: Really?

JJ: Yeah. There were 2500, history shows that, prior almost right after Hitler began to purge people. There were 2500 in Dachau.

PS: 2500. Would you have any knowledge at all of how many survived, how many died?

Jl: No.

PS: Or, do you think any of them were released?

Jl: [unclear]

PS: That is, by the Germans before liberation?

Jl: I have no idea, Phil.

PS: But 25- you would...

Jl: History, yeah, there's a lot of hi-...

PS: [unclear]

Jl: Yeah, history shows, yeah, that 2500...

PS: I wonder if history would trace, has traced the fate of those 2500, whether they were just exterminated along with all the others or if possibly they survived as a, as a unit.

Jl: Oh, I guess some survived, but percentage-wise I'm sure...

PS: Pretty close to the other...

Jl: Sure, percentage-wise they suffered.

PS: How long did you remain, oh, from Dachau you proceeded in what direction?

Jl: Well, we--I was there in the army of occupation until December of '45.

PS: Well when you left Dachau...

Jl: And then I, when we left Dachau, I went to Salzburg, Austria.

PS: Now between leaving Dachau, you were then into really the la-, the official surrender date of the German armies was May the 8th.

Jl: Right.

PS: Now between Dachau and your, say, advancing south toward the Austrian Alps, did you then see liberated prisoners along the roadside? Did you see anything there?

Jl: Not that I was aware of, Phil, because by this time they had discarded their prison garb. I'm sure they couldn't wait to get out of their prison garb, you know, and get a bath and get cleaned up.

PS: Yeah, there were, yeah, I guess.

Jl: You know? It's very likely we could have met a lot of them but didn't know they...

PS: Yeah, then from...

Jl: [unclear]

PS: The time you left Dachau till getting into Austria and at the end of the war...

Jl: That was the end of it.

PS: Yeah, that was the end of it.

Jl: That was the end of it.

PS: And on the road from Dachau to your final destination in Austria, you did not see any other concentration camps or liberated prisoners just wandering in the woods or...

JJ: I saw no concentration camps, and I saw no liberated prisoners that I was aware of.

PS: Jack, do you--can you recall pretty much your emotional, your feelings when you were first confronted with this unexpected sight of the bodies in the boxcars and the, the stench, the...

JJ: I, I would imagine I said to myself, "My God, how did something like this happen?" I mean, you're speechless.

PS: Yeah.

JJ: You're speechless. You, regardless of how eloquent you might think you are, Phil, when you see something like that, the adjectives and adverbs don't come flowing too quickly. You just don't know, you just can't explain how you feel.

PS: Yeah. I have heard speakers who are eloquent, the most eloquent of speakers express themselves that no matter how eloquent an individual might be, there just, there is no description. There are no words...

JJ: You don't have words. You don't have words...

PS: Right.

JJ: To describe something as horrible as this.

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

JJ: Well, the war was over in May, May 8th I think. I was there until December. I came home in December, of '45.

PS: During that time you were still in Austria?

JJ: I was in Austria, going about what an army of occupation does, following orders and...

PS: So, during that...

JJ: ...doing my job.

PS: During that time which would be...

JJ: From May...

PS: Six to eight months...

JJ: Yeah, mmm hmm?

PS: Did you have much contact with the Austrian people?

JJ: Yes, yes, we did. We had a good bit of contact with the Austrian people. And as I look back, that was horrible also, to the point where we would go into a town and put the people out of their home. And take a nice home and there would be perhaps in our particular case oh, three of us or four of us in this one house. We were commissioned officers and we...

Tape one, side two:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, continuing the interview with John Igoe, on October 22, 1990. Jack you were just, we, before the other side ran out, you were just, I had asked you about contact with Austrians, and you were describing...

JJ: All right, in the home that we lived in, the people who owned the home moved upstairs, to the upper floors. And we took over the downstairs floor. They were friendly. We were friendly to them. The person's name was Fogel. Funny I should remember her name. Frau Fogel. And she tried to do little things for us, and we did little things for her. And she had a child or two there. We would give her soap for her children and for herself, and she would give us some little courtesies also. She was a nice woman as I, as I recall. And we had a man in our outfit who was an animal husbandry instructor, and of course any time that the animals were pregnant and delivering they called on Art Shick to deliver the young calves as I recall. So, I wouldn't say that we feel that we associated, didn't socialize with them, but we were civil to them and they were civil to us.

PS: Yeah, I had the same...

JJ: Sure, yeah.

PS: Was there at any time any exchange about what you knew of what had happened, the, in regard to the concentration camps? Was there any conversation at all on that subject?

JJ: Not that I recall. Not that I recall.

PS: Now you...

JJ: That is with the natives of...

PS: Yeah with...

JJ: [unclear]

PS: Then you of course left Europe and that was the end of the war. Did it, did the, did the thought and the smell and the experience, did it linger on after you? Did it hit you at any later period of time?

JJ: Well I guess I thought about it a lot in the immediate years, but time heals things and after the first couple of years I suppose it faded from my memory. I knew it was there, but it faded from my memory.

PS: The recall is still 100 percent sharp.

JJ: The recall...

PS: But it doesn't...

JJ: I still a...

PS: It's more or less laid to rest as far as the emotions.

JJ: Yeah.

PS: It can last so long and [unclear]...

JJ: As a matter of fact, Phil, talking to you here I've remembered things that were out of my mind a...

- PS: A lot of the boys that I've interviewed were amazed at their recall.
- JJ: Oh sure.
- PS: Some have said to me, "Oh, you know, I, it's so long ago. Forty-five years ago."
- JJ: Sure, certainly.
- PS: And yet, well, I had the same, we had the same experience...
- JJ: Yeah, sure, sure.
- PS: When I was asked to be interviewed myself. I said I have so little that I remember, and when we finished like 45 minutes later the interviewer said to me, "You thought you had nothing to say." Jack, I've reached the end of the questions that I had in mind or had written down here. Before we close is there anything at all that you would like to add to your statements and testimony?
- JJ: Well, I have nothing to add as far as my experience was concerned. However, I just hope that something like this never happens again, man's inhumanity to man. And, I deem it an honor to be interviewed, or to have, have my words on tape that can be used for posterity. It's a real honor.
- PS: Well, we--I'd just like to say on behalf of Gratz College that we certainly are very grateful to you for granting this interview with us. And on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College, I want to thank you very, very much on behalf of all of us. This has been the interview with Mr. John Igoe, and thank you very, very much, John.
- JJ: Thank you, Phil.