

Rough transcript of interview by the Surviving Generations of the Holocaust on July 14, 1995, at a reunion in Seattle 50 years after the liberation of Dachau

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn513184> (15:42)

John McGovern:

Rainbow Association founded shortly after World War I, and continued by World War II men, primarily to allow those who were in combat to visit with each other. Has been a real therapy for them, allows them to tell their children their experiences, possibly even write about their memories. About 2,600 active members. Shortly after WWI probably at its largest because units almost all people who knew each other in civilian life, at least 6,000 or 7,000 active members.

I entered the Army in 1943, not quite 19, nearly completed second year of college. Basic training at Camp Hood, Texas, with tank destroyers. Radio operator on tank destroyer; they went very fast across country. You had to bite your teeth very firmly. Then Army specialized training program at University of Kansas. Closed program when looked like war wouldn't last long and everyone in that program went to the Rainbow Division.

How did you come to be a POW?

Went overseas in November 1944 without supporting units—artillery, others—because they desperately needed manpower in Europe. Landed in Marseilles, traveled north by train, in 3rd Army of Gen. Patton momentarily when the Bulge occurred. At that time, more experienced 7th Army divisions shifted to 3rd Army. We were sent to Strasbourg area in the 7th Army.

Our combat front was about 10 times normal because of taking divisions out of there. We mostly defended towns without trying to keep the Germans on a line. We were in small town called Sessenheim and my machine gun squad were supporting a 57 antitank gun. I was on second floor with another member of my squad and we called the shots for antitank gun because their sights were damaged. Actually managed to hit a number of German tanks but 57mm shells wouldn't penetrate German tanks. Tank attacks came four times; second time, a tank destroyer we didn't even know was there knocked a tank out right in front of us. Third time, the fellow I shared a bunk with in POW camp hit a tank with a bazooka. Each time the tanks retreated. But the fourth time, early in the morning of January 18, the tank came up in front of us. As I went upstairs, German infantry troops in backyard started throwing grenades in window wells of basement. The antitank crew was there and some civilians; civilians started screaming, particularly one lady. Germans started shouting for us to surrender. I don't know if it was the lady who was screaming, but someone surrendered. Germans got rather strident about getting someone to come out. I went out basement stairs. When I appeared at the door, a German lieutenant stepped out from behind this building carrying a Smeissner?, a machine gun. I walked up to him; I hadn't prepared very well for surrender because I had a grenade on my jacket and he grabbed that and felt in my field jacket pockets and I had some loose ammunition there. And he said, "Chicago gangster," only

words in English he said; perhaps all he knew. Eventually the rest of them all came out, 20 people in the building, mostly antitank crew.

There were some thoughts of shooting us by the Germans but someone interrupted and so they didn't. There were eight or 10 people with another platoon that were shot after they were captured. We walked back to the Rhine River and they took us across in barges. At the time I was captured my pockets were full of German shoulder patches and swastikas. I hadn't taken them off dead Germans; we found them in the supply house, but even dumb as I was, that was an automatic "you're dead." But fortunately I got a chance to dispose of them before they made a detailed search of us.

POW for three months. Prison camp 20 km north of Hanover, Stalag 11-B, very close to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp [just east of Fallingbommel]. We were crowded, slept two in a bunk, didn't have mattresses. There were 25,000 in POW camp: 15,000 Russians; 5,000 British, about 2,000 of these were British Airborne captured in Holland; 2,500 Americans; rest French, Polish, other nationalities, Yugoslav.

We were treated fairly well. Roll call twice a day. A number of compounds with different nationalities; for a while I was in a barracks with 500 Russians. Food was the biggest problem. Almost all of us lost 20, 30, 40 pounds during those three months. We did get three Red Cross packages; they were very helpful because they had cigarettes which were the medium of exchange. Russian prisoners worked on farms and would smuggle bread back and trade for cigarettes.

Any moment stand out in POW experience?

Most memorable was just after we were liberated. We didn't have much food and all the water systems were damaged so we didn't have water either. The British 7th Armored that liberated us were in no position to feed 25,000 people. A friend of mine and I, both of whom had bad feet from frostbite, heard there were raisins in a warehouse nearby. We walked seemingly forever but it was probably five miles and eventually got close to a town. Just before we got there we met two men, Yugoslavians, carrying a case of raisins. They told us where to go; there was one case left. Must have weighed 30 pounds. About half a mile back into the forest one of these men came running toward us and motioned us to follow him. We followed him for a quarter mile and saw the case of raisins in the path and his friend was hanging from a tree. He had been lynched. We found out later that the British thought some German girl had been raped and a bunch of German civilians either knew who raped her or chose the closest person at hand in retaliation.

You've been to Dachau number of times since the war, went back this year. What made this year different?

First time we went was because we'd heard of Dachau almost from the moment of its inception as a political prison. Of course after the war we heard all the stories about the Holocaust. We went there initially mostly to sightsee, visited the museum there. In 1992 we went to hang a

plaque and there were hundreds of former inmates there. I got to visit with a number of them. It was the first year Russian former prisoners had been allowed to come to the camp and I had very nice visits with several of them. I developed a stronger feeling about what happened there and of course this year is the 50th anniversary of the liberation and as president of the Rainbow there was no place else I could be at that time.

Interviewer mentions photos McGovern had with him that were taken on visit to Dachau [not shown to camera].

There's still a model barracks there, in some respects similar to what we had as prisoners of war. The treatment was not the same but the bedding and beds themselves were quite similar.

One photo is of the memorial to Polish priests; about a thousand died in Dachau. Others of crematorium and fence and towers at Dachau.

In '92 other thing that really affected us: We went out to this area a short distance from Dachau where the Germans actually used Russian prisoners as targets. There was a wall to catch the bullets but they would turn the Russians loose and force them to run across the field and practice their shooting. I'm sure it wasn't official practice, they just enjoyed it, I presume.

[End.]

Notes:

John McGovern was born in Iowa on March 25, 1924, and died on April 8, 2006

Articles about 50th anniversary of Dachau liberation, including remarks by McGovern:

<https://newspaperarchive.com/panama-city-news-herald-may-01-1995-p-16/>

https://www.tulsaworld.com/news/dachau-survivors-remember-liberation/article_7c6975e7-9b14-5fed-b26b-48664cc3f87f.html