

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Batanides, Thomas

Date of interview: 8/8/2001

Summary: Liberator

Tom's family was a very religious Greek Orthodox family. His mother took assimilation very hard. They spoke only Greek in the house, where he was raised with 8 siblings.

Tom was drafted into the war in 1942 when he was 19 years old. First he was trained in Oregon and then moved to Colorado. He was part of the US Army 104th Infantry Division, originally stationed in Oregon. They were shipped over to France in 1944, and entered Normandy 90 days after D-Day. They went through there to Belgium. They would eventually go through Poland then into Germany. He said he first heard of these concentration and death camps through word-of-mouth about two weeks before they entered one. They were, however, very skeptical and almost didn't believe it. They entered Nordhausen Camp and helped in the release of the prisoners. One of his first sights was of bulldozers moving thousands of dead, emaciated bodies into trenches. All he could think about was "did this really happen?" They actually never went into the crematoriums, but could see the chimneys with smoke coming out of them when they first arrived, and his imagination took him in disgust.

Tom said that he and the rest of his infantry division never actually analyzed the events during those years, nor for years to come. They talked about it for the first time during a reunion in 1982. They tried to analyze the reasons why these deaths happened. Tom said that out of 1,000 troops, only 100 were specifically chosen to actually go into the crematoriums. He wasn't one of them, but he said these people were in awe of the sights they had seen.

The reason for telling his story was for "prevention." He thinks these atrocities happen everyday and that they must be stopped. "We must respect each person as a person," he said. These events will forever stay in his memory and affect his life forever.