Tom Grossman, Part 2

00:00:20

Grossman: -- worked with, we went to the railroad station that was bombed to shreds by the American air force. You know, it was a beautiful sight. I enjoyed cleaning up the rubble. I was just wishing that they had done a little more than that. So we were there for about, I think, two or three weeks, something like this.

During this time while I was in Dresden, I had a very curious experience. One day they wanted me to come and peel potatoes, which I did, and there was a young SS guard who was sitting there. And he was sitting there across the yard from me and peeling an apple. He had a knife. And when I’d seen him to peel an apple, I just felt so craving for that apple, you know, I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him. And I must have looked kind of hateful at him, you know. He must have felt something that it wasn’t pleasant coming from me, so he came over and asked me what I’m looking at. I said, “I’m looking at you.” He said, “Don’t look. I’ll cut your eyes out.” And he actually took his knife that he had and aimed it to my eye, and I just bent my head down real quick, and he cut a piece of my -- right here, so I still have that --

Interviewer: Scar.

Grossman: -- scar. And then it was some strange reason, two days later, I was shipped out of there, too, and we ended up -- well, actually, at this point, we weren’t shipped out. We were really marching, partially -- no, we’d been taking a train from Dresden and then taken off the train and started marching. During the march, we had two air raids, and then we had a very, very bad episode one time. I had been together with a very dear friend of mine who was also my classmate, and I was kind of aiding him, and one day while we were marching on the road, a horse-drawn flatbed wagon comes up with two SS men and asks us, “Who is tired that wants to ride the flatbed?” And my friend said, “I’m going.” I said, “No, you’re not.” “Yes, I am. You don’t be crazy. You come too.” I said, “No, I’m not going. I’m absolutely not going, and you don’t go either.” “Oh, come on, don’t be silly.” So he went, and so did 25 others, all around, sitting around on those flatbed and some in the middle of the flatbed. And then the two SS took off, and they took off the road. The horses started running, you know, galloping or trotting or whatever, and then they veered off to the left -- I remember like it was today -- into the woods, and all of a sudden, I hear the submachine gun going off. And these two bastards are coming back and asking, smiling. They says, “Anybody wants a buggy ride?” So we kept on marching.

About two days later, we arrived to a camp called Leitmeritz. It’s in Czechoslovakia. Name today is Litomerice. This was pretty well in the beginning of April at this point. And it was also one of these do-nothing camps, no work, nothing. We stayed there about three days, and all of a sudden, one morning, we have a roll call. An SS sergeant comes into the barracks with a whistle and yells out that -- in German, of course. He says, “S*ämtliche Juden, antreden,”* which means, “All Jews come together.” Get out of the barracks and come to roll call. This camp, we had different various nationality of people: Poles, Czechs, some German criminals, and various different types. Each had a little strip with a triangle on it. The color of the triangle, of the insignia, meant your nationality or your race. And of course, the yellow meant Jewish.

And we went out in the roll call, and at that point they told us to take off our jackets, pile them up, leave our dish and spoon, throw them in the pile, and start marching. And one fellow behind me whom I was pretty friendly with, a fellow named Bernstein [phonetic], he said, “You know where we’re going.” I said, “You know, I have a pretty good idea.” This is the end, you know. He said, “You know, this is the end.” I said, “You know, I know. You don’t have to talk about it. There’s not a thing we can do about it, unfortunately, because they have the machine gun and we don’t have anything.” So we went -- we marched to the gate in columns of five. We marched to the main gate, and at the main gate, we were given over to these boys with the dog tag and the submachine gun and started marching. And when half of the column, which we were about, I think about 200 or 250 of us, passed through the main gate, we see a motorcycle coming with a German soldier -- I don’t remember whether he was an SS or what he was -- with a piece of paper, waving, you know, and screaming his head off. “Halt! Halt! Halt!” And okay, we stopped, and he handed over to the guy, the leader of the group, and he read it. He let out a series of German curse words and hurled us back again back to the barracks.

And the same thing happened the next morning, again, *“Sämtliche Juden, antreden.”* And so on, but they didn’t ask for our jackets, and they didn’t ask for our plates or spoons or anything. On the contrary, they gave us boiled potatoes and things, so Bernstein says, “Here we go again.” I said, “Eh, my friend, let me tell you something. I know I’m a good bit younger than you are, but if the Nazis want to kill you, they won’t feed you first. I don’t know what it is, but this must be a new trick.”

So after they fed us, then they asked us to leave our dishes in a pile and told us to march. And we went through the main gate again, but at this time at the main gate, rather than having one of the SS boys with the dog tag coming, they had some real old guards with some very peculiar rifles. I mean, these darned rifles are about 6-foot tall, you know, from World War One, with a bayonet attached to them. And these old men was about -- every one of them were about in their late 70’s, at least. If not old, at least it seemed that way to me at the time. And we started marching, and one was coming kind of close to me, and I asked him, I said, “Hey, where are we going?” At this point, my German was just about flawless. “Oh,” he says, “you’re free. You’re going home.” I said, “What the hell are you talking about?” He says, “I mean that. You’re going home. You’re free.” “When?” “Oh, in about an hour, you’ll be free.”

So we kept on marching, and we marched about an hour, maybe two at the most, but at this point, we were marched into a place, and the gates opened, and there was other uniforms standing there. And all of a sudden, I realized that these men who were standing outside were not Germans, not German uniforms, neither *Wehrmacht* nor SS nor any of the German army insignia. They were Czech police. And we have taken to Theresienstadt, Terezin. And we were turned over to the Czech command, which was -- it was, to be exact, 20th of March -- I’m sorry, April, 20th of April. And we were placed in different places. I was fortunate to get into a place, and I all of a sudden met some people who were from my hometown, and I knew them, and I was absolutely amazed because they looked absolutely marvelous, fantastic. And what was Theresienstadt?

Interviewer: We have only a couple of minutes left, unfortunately.

Grossman: All right.

Interviewer: So will you, in the last couple of minutes, is there anything you’d like to kind of wrap this up with?

Grossman: Yeah. Theresienstadt was a ghetto that’s German and the Nazis set up as a fake place. They brought in people and showed the world that it was a showplace, that there was no concentration camps; it was only a ghetto. And look at Theresienstadt, and they have theaters and everything else, and they lead a beautiful life. And the people looked beautiful there, but basically, what they did, they brought them in and then took them out and took them to Auschwitz and killed them. But this is where I was liberated, April 28th. No, not actually April 28th; May 8. The American army came in and took the camp over and a day later turned it over to the Russians. And finally, in July 1945, I was permitted to leave.

Interviewer: Where did you go from there?

Grossman: Went back to Budapest.

Interviewer: And how much of your family remained?

Grossman: Nobody was there at the time. I found two of my aunts --

00:15:43