

Interviewee: Charles Woehrle

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 17 May 2004

Location: Woehrle residence, St Paul, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, July 2004

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, July 2004

Charles Woehrle was born 28 September 1916, in Nashua, Iowa, one of six children. He grew up in Minnesota, graduated from Pine City High School in 1933, and then attended the University of Minnesota.

In January 1942, Charles enlisted in the Army Air Corps with the hope of becoming a pilot. He instead was trained as a bombardier for B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers, and by April 1943 was stationed in England, a member of the 8th Air Force, 509th Squadron, 351st Bomb Group stationed at Polebrook, in North Hamptonshire, England.

On the 29 May 1943, on a mission to St. Nazaire, a coastal port in France, his plane was shot down over the water. Of the ten-man crew, six survived. Over the next twenty-three months, Charles spent time in Stalag Luft III, at Sagan, and then, near war's end, at overcrowded Stalag VII-A Moosburg, in Bavaria. This camp was liberated by advancing American forces on 29 April 1945.

Charles was returned to the United States in May 1945, and discharged before the end of the year. He was married in June 1945 (wife Elizabeth).

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

C = Charles Woehrle

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 17 May 2004, and this is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor, and today I'm speaking with Mr. Charles Woehrle at his residence in St. Paul. First, Mr. Woehrle, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to show me things and speak with me today.

C: You're welcome.

T: Let me begin with some information I learned from you before we started taping. You were born September 28, 1916, in Nashua, Iowa, one of six children. You grew up in Minnesota, and graduated from Pine City High School, class of 1933. Attended the University of Minnesota in the late 1930s and in January 1942 you enlisted in the Army Air Corps. Your plans at the beginning were to be a pilot, as I understand.

C: Yes.

T: You ended up being a bombardier, and in April of 1943 were in England as a bombardier on a B-17 aircraft, flying with the 8th Air Force, 509th Squadron, 351st Bomb Group stationed at Polebrook, in North Hamptonshire, England. On 29 May 1943, on a mission to St. Nazaire on the coast of France, your plane was brought down. I'm wondering if we could start with that. I'll ask you to describe the mission that particular day and how you ended up, quite literally, in the water.

C: Well, it was interesting. Our pre-ops meetings in the morning to lay out the mission—we would get up at four thirty. It was still dark obviously. They had a breakfast put out for us and we would just go and take what we wanted and go down to the flight line. Our plane was armored by the noncoms who did that work. We got in and we would take off at a designated time and we gathered over the English Channel. And another wing gathered together to coordinate this mission. The mission was to bomb the submarine pens at St. Nazaire. They were immense, big concrete installations built by the Germans and if you dropped the bomb on the top it wouldn't do any good because it was so well fortified and the concrete so thick they would have bounced off. But we did go for the slips, the passageways in under these bunkers where then the subs would be safe. If we could get our bomb into the water then we would have a successful mission.

T: That's pinpoint aiming, isn't it?

C: Pinpoint aiming. And I was operating a Norden bombsite, which is a remarkable machine. When we'd get on the bomb run and we get the target in our site, then we would be flying the ship automatically from the bombsite.

T: Was this mission, Mr. Woehrle, any different from the other four or five you'd been on?

C: Well basically we would have a target in advance and then the big thing was that we recognize it from the altitude we were. If it was cloudy day we would have trouble. Sometimes we would abort the mission. We aborted only one. So we had five actual missions where we dropped bombs before I was shot down. Yes, they were all similar in the sense that we were aiming for a target and tried to get the bomb onto the target the best we could.

T: What brought your plane down on 29 May?

C: Flak it's called. It's anti-aircraft guns that the Germans had perfected. It was very well done. Flak is a contraction of a long German word, *Flugzeugabwehrkanone*. So from that F-L-A-K is taken, and that's the word we used to identify what they were doing. I wasn't aware. I had just dropped the bombs on St. Nazaire and fortunately I saw that I had hit one of the slips and felt very good about it. So then I was turning to flip the toggle switch to close the bomb bay doors, and the light would not go off which meant that the doors weren't closed. So I called Baldwin, who was the turret ball gunner and said, "Baldy, why aren't these doors going closed?" He said, "Don't you know we've been hit!" I said, "What!?" He said, "We've been hit by flak." He said, "Look out in front!" Then I looked out through my Plexiglas nose and there were all kinds of white puffs, pink puffs, black puffs where they had just absolutely got our level and we were really damaged badly from this flak. Then an engine went.

(1, A, 52)

T: When was it clear to you the plane was going down, not going to make it back?

C: Well, the minute I realized that we had lost our position in our formation due to engine failure and due to damage to the airplane. The pilot was having an awful time keeping it level. And of course we became then Tail End Charlie and we knew then—that was a very sick feeling—because the last thing we thought would ever happen to us would be that we would be shot down. Because we were the lead plane.

T: So like a lot of other people you witnessed the losses around you but never figured that your plane...

C: No. We never thought it would happen to us.

T: Describe the feeling then when it was apparent that you might not make it back. What was going through your mind at that moment?

C: Well, the thing was, I had always helped Jim, the pilot, trim the engines because I had a very good look at the four engines from my position as bombardier in the Plexiglas nose. I would help him trim the engines. You could do it with sort of a stroboscopic motion. So I was very aware of each of the engines and the number two engine had a runaway prop which is very dangerous. Could tear off a wing. And number three was on fire and the fire was gaining momentum and I said, "Jim, I think we're in bad trouble. What do you think?" He said, "I do think we're going to make a decision here quickly." He said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. We'll go out on our pre-prescribed order." We all had an order if it should happen. Who would go first, second and so forth. He said, "Then I will make a tour of the ship to see what the situation is and then I'll come back and we'll abandon ship. And I'll be the last to go." And I said, "Fine." So then I took my order. I forget whether I was second, third, fourth. I forget which. But I went right out the front hatch. And that was the last that I knew at that moment.

T: How much experience did you have jumping with a parachute?

C: Never. We had no experience.

T: So here you are going out of a stricken airplane with a parachute. Over the water?

C: Over the water.

T: Talk about that Mr. Woehrle.

C: Well, we had been told not to pull the D-ring too quickly, because we had to clear the slipstream. They had learned that people had been tied up. They had hit the tail empenage and been beaten to death. So be sure you clear the plane before you pull your D-ring. Well, I must say that I had no fear of jumping at all because I knew the alternative was so much worse.

T: Go down with the plane, right?

C: It could explode. And that would be the end of all of us. So I had no trouble jumping. I had a friend who was afraid of jumping, and he went down with the plane because he would not jump.

T: No kidding. Wouldn't get out of the plane.

C: No. No. He was afraid to jump. But I got through the slipstream. I pulled the D-ring and I waited and the chute didn't open. I thought well, there must be a delay mechanism. But I realized I was falling too far and too long and I realized that my chute had hung up and wouldn't open. So I reached and pulled. It was an envelope

fold and I realized that the grommets had gotten tied up on the pin and so I released that and then the ten-foot chute came out. I pulled that out and that took the thirty-foot chute and BANGO! (*claps hands*) The thing opened, and I was hanging there. But it was such a shock because I had reached terminal velocity. Probably 220 miles an hour and I nearly broke out of the harness. The chute went up and broke my jaw. Dislocated my shoulder, and I had a knee and a groin injury, but I was so thankful that I stayed in the harness.

(1, A, 89)

T: What do you think of or what did you think of as you're drifting down towards the ground?

C: The first thing I noticed was it was ocean. I could see no land. They had told us that if we should pendulum, which we probably would, we would get seasick. So in order to stop the pendulum action of ourselves in the chute we would take three or four shroud lines and give it a jerk and then that would stop it. Then I did that. I was absolutely shocked to see that the chute fouled and folded under and down I went again. The only thing that saved my life was the height at which I jumped. I didn't know what to do. I had pulled everything to see... And then my Mae West [life jacket] blew up. Because we were in rarified air, and it knocked the wind out of me and I thought I was dying, but I recovered that. Then finally a wind, a crosswind, caught the parachute and it opened about a thousand feet from the ocean.

T: So you had a moment, some moments of panic there.

C: I did. I had moments and moments of panic. And I said the Lord's Prayer. It was so quiet when I was hanging there after all what we had been through with the guns, the shooting. And of course the Focke Wulfs [German fighter planes], a dozen or more, surrounded us and killed four in the midship. They killed Baldy whom I had just talked to, two waist gunners, and the radio operator. So four were gone. Jim saw that when he made his rounds. Then he bailed out but when he bailed out the ship had already glided and he struggled with it so it wouldn't go into the water as far as he could and he then jumped. He landed on land in Brittany in a tree. And that's another story. His story.

T: You landed in the water.

C: I landed in the ocean.

T: What happened? You land in the water. You have this parachute on.

C: I had a Mae West life preserver on so I didn't sink, but I went down so deep I thought I had hit the bottom. But of course I hadn't, because I had a parachute hooked onto me. But I released the parachute and that began to float. Then I looked around and I was injured. My jaw—I couldn't close my mouth properly because my

jaw was fractured and I was hurting. So I looked and in the far distance I saw two black spots and I thought it must be boats. And they were. It turned out to be fishermen. They had seen my parachute.

T: How far from the land were you?

C: I don't know. I suppose maybe, say, ten miles.

T: So you clearly weren't going to get to shore on your own.

C: Oh, no. No. Not on my own. So the boat had one man in it as it turned out, and the other boat had two. And the one that had two men in came and pulled me out of the water.

T: What happened at that moment? You've got two people in this boat. Did you immediately recognize them as French?

C: I asked were they French and they said yes. I had used some of my high school French. I could barely make myself understood. When they spoke too fast I said, "*parle vous, si vous ple* ***" and they seemed to understand that then they'd talk slower, but then they'd race again. I wouldn't understand them. But an interesting thing happened. As we were picking up a breakfast that was left for us at four thirty that morning there was some peach sauce there and we ate some of that and probably had a cup of coffee and maybe a piece of toast and that was all. But when I was in that boat and the boat was going on the waves I had *mal d'mer*—I was seasick. And I threw up over the boat and I was curious to note that as I threw up there was still large pieces of that peach sauce that had not been digested at all. So what happens when you get into a tense situation, you're not afraid but you are totally tensed and the body just shuts down.

(1, A, 144)

T: Is that a safe way to describe the way you felt at that time?

C: Yes. Yes. I had never seen any situation like this before and I remember another thing. One time when I got back to the base I could hardly touch my knees they were so sore. And I wondered what on earth what was causing this? And so I thought the next time I do this I'm going to get back and find out why my knees are so sore. I had two guns, two .50 caliber guns, and as the canvas supply chain holding these would go through the gun they would eject and go on the floor. I would walk around on my knees on the edges of these things which you couldn't do voluntarily, but I wasn't even aware of it.

T: The .50 caliber shells on your knees. No wonder your knees were sore.

C: No wonder they were sore.

T: The French fishermen, did they take you to shore? Were you afraid of what they might do to you?

C: No. I could tell that they were friendly. I asked them, "Do you want to save the silk in the parachute?" They said we would like to but we don't dare to do it. If the Germans find it.

T: Did they give you to the Germans right away?

C: No, they did not. They did not give me to the Germans at all. They took me to their little island. They were very poor people. They were fishermen and they were button makers from shells. I could see big mounds of shells with all the holes in them made from buttons. I don't know if that was their only occupation. I was soaking wet of course, and I undressed and the woman gave me a pair of shorts and a sweater to put on and took me into the house and cooked for me a fried egg and some wine and some dark bread. She apologized for the dark bread thinking that Americans would only like white bread. But it was very good. And I was sitting there and I had my escape kit with me which had money. I had a Colt revolver and I had maps and money and as I was looking over this a man came in and said, "*Les allemands son assi.*"

T: Or in English, "The Germans are here."

C: Yes. So they had seen me come down and they tracked the chute. They came to the island and they took me prisoner.

T: The same day, Mr. Woehrle?

C: Oh, the same day, within two hours.

T: Here you are face to face with the Germans for the first time. As close as you and I are sitting here. Describe that moment—what impression did those Germans make on you, and what's going through your mind?

C: They were two officers and they had—this was a Saturday, and so they must have been on a little bit of a holiday. But they were called into action and they took their wives with them and they were aboard this—it was a combination inboard motor and a sailing ship at the same time. I remember the sail was furled and the mast was down, and I remember that they took my clothes we draped them over the sail and the mast so they would dry. They were commenting on my Munsingwear underwear. I had longjohns. I didn't want to speak German, because I didn't want them to know that I understood anything. They asked me in very fractured English where I came from. I told them I was from the USA. Just inconsequential conversation.

T: Nothing we would call questioning...

C: No. No interrogation. That came later.

T: Conversation actually, it sounds like.

C: It was conversation. They took me to the coastal town of Vannes, where there was a huge big medieval dungeon castle type thing. Big thick walls. Big everything. First of all they took me into an office and they did interrogate me.

T: Describe that.

(1, A, 197)

C: Well, it was an off outbuilding. Not impressive at all. I sat in a chair and there was a desk there and they started to interrogate me. They took my leather jacket. They took my coverall. They took my shoes. They took my watch. The only thing they left to me was my underwear, my trousers and my shirt. And the socks that were on my feet. They took my shoes. And they gave me a mismatched pair of flight boots.

T: How many Germans were interrogating you?

C: Probably two.

T: Spoke English to you?

C: Yes. They asked me where we'd come from. I said, I can't speak it. And actually what they were doing there was getting me ready to go to Dulag Luft at Oberursal. I was in the prison for two nights, and the third day I was taken out into the courtyard and I saw a rifle squad there by the big stone wall and I thought, is this it? Are they going to shoot us? And as we lined up I recognized our copilot, our chief engineer, and our tail gunner.

T: For the first time you've seen them now. Alive.

C: First time. I didn't know how they got there. But we didn't recognize each other. We didn't give any evidence of knowing each other.

T: I see. Had you had any medical attention to what was bothering you?

C: Not a thing. Not a thing.

T: So your jaw was still in bad shape?

C: I couldn't mesh my teeth at all.

T: Could you talk?

C: I could talk, yes. But I was hurting.

T: Were you moved by rail, by train to Dulag Luft at Oberursel?

C: Yes. Yes, we were.

T: What do you remember about that journey?

C: Well, it was terrible. When we got to Frankfurt they couldn't take us right away, and so I think we spent the night in the Frankfurt railway station and way up on the third floor in the attic. The dust was so thick! And we had to lie down in that dust. I remember how filthy it was.

T: How many of you were there?

C: I suppose there were about maybe ten of us.

T: Had you come by boxcar or by what kind of car?

C: No. It was a passenger, Pullman type car. A passenger car. It wasn't a very long journey. We had guards at every place. We were then at Dulag, and there's where you went through the tough interrogation.

T: Dulag Luft is a well-known facility for all aircrew people. Talk about your impressions of that place.

(1, A, 242)

C: They had interrogators of all stripes and kinds. Some were harder than others. A young man from Louisiana that I had sort of buddied with, when he came out of interrogation I hardly recognized him. They had hit his face with a rubber hose to try to extract information. For me, they interrogated me, and for me, to encourage me to say more, they put me in a room of 135 degrees to sweat me out. We tried to make some conversation because you had to say something but you couldn't give any more than your name, rank and serial number.

T: Was it hard not to do that?

C: It was very hard, because you wondered what was coming next. But finally they just... I was so relieved when they took me out of that room because I was wringing wet. They kept me from going to the bathroom too and I thought well, I'm just going to have to wet my pants because what else can I do? And finally they let me out. Then we had a fairly decent meal which I was surprised. And it was such a relief to have that over with.

T: How many times were you interrogated? Would you describe it as one longer session or several shorter ones?

C: It seemed to me it was one long session. I don't remember many. I remember that we were... It depends. When we would be going places, we'd have to be lining up to get onto it. If I saw an interrogator—I would try to pick a kindly looking face. Somebody that had more understanding, had a warmer look in his eye, because I knew that some were much harsher than others. Because I had seen that. And some were very, very, very harsh indeed.

T: As far as physical punishment experienced by you, you mentioned an overheated room.

C: A 135 degree room. Yes.

T: And then lack of being able to go to the bathroom.

C: Yes. Yes.

T: Any physical punishment?

C: No. They did not hit me.

T: Were you worried, afraid that they might?

C: Oh, I didn't know what they would do. I knew that the Gestapo was not very... They were harsh. We knew that.

T: How had you been prepared, in your opinion, for being a POW? What kind of training had you had about, if you're captured here's what to expect?

C: It was very, very brief actually. They gave us these packets with a map, a compass, money. Oh, by the way, when I left the family, the French family, I gave them all my money. I also left my revolver, but they said they didn't want it because they didn't want to be found with it. So I just threw it outside. And all the things I had I actually left there. Because I didn't want to give them to the Germans.

T: Sure. So that stuff you left. Had you been given any kind of training or warning about if you're taken a POW, here's what you can expect?

C: I don't remember that we had very much training at all. Very little anyway. I think we had a session that they told us what was in the emergency kit. Of course I remembered a lot about it later, in prison camp, because we tried to get things like that together for escape purposes.

T: Sure. So Dulag Luft, it looks like from your record, about a week you were there?

(1, A, 298)

C: It could have been up to a week. I think that in the book here it tells the dates.

T: I think it was a week.

C: Probably was a week. Yes.

T: So you had interrogation. Any kind of medical treatment there?

C: None.

T: So whatever you had was simply left to heal on its own.

C: I wasn't bleeding, you see.

T: Still hurting, it sounds like.

C: Oh, yes. It was hurting, yes. My shoulder was dislocated. I got that back.

T: How were you moved to Stalag Luft III?

C: We were put on a train. These were not so much the open seats on both sides. These were more compartments.

T: But no boxcars again.

C: No boxcars. But we had a guard at every door of the compartment. And my feet and legs swelled so much that I was almost glad—I couldn't have gotten a shoe on—I was glad I had those oversized mismatched flight boots.

T: A blessing in disguise from losing your shoes, it sounds like.

C: Yes. So actually, when I got to Stalag Luft III, I really didn't have anything. I didn't have anything to wear except what I had on.

T: And you mentioned pants, shirt and these flight shoes.

C: These were the mismatched boots here. They're flight boots actually. And these were the two men. [reference unclear]

T: What do you recall about the journey by train? That's a long way from Frankfurt to Sagan.

C: I remember that it was from Frankfurt over through Leipzig and then to Sagan which is called Niederschlesien, which means Lower Silesia. And it's probably a few miles from Poland. Where our camp was now belongs to Poland.

T: That's right. What do you recall about the journey on the train?

C: That it was very long. We got very little to eat. The only relief we had from sitting, that's why my feet were so swollen, was to go to the toilet. And it was a filthy toilet on the train. I remember everything was poor.

T: Any interaction with the guards on the train or not?

C: No. We had no interaction at all.

T: So they were there and you were there, but that was essentially it.

C: They were not cooperating. They were not conversational at all.

T: How many men were being moved on the train as POWs?

C: I don't know about the trainload but I know that there were probably about eight in our compartment.

T: All Americans?

C: Yes.

T: And did you know any of them?

(1, A, 351)

C: Well, I recall that of our crew was with me. I think it was Leo, our copilot. But you see what happened was, of the six there were only two of us that were officers. Leo, he was a warrant officer.

T: So the enlisted men would go to different camps.

C: They went to a different camp.

T: Right. Did you feel it was safe to talk to each other on the train?

C: Yes. We felt it was safe to talk. We wondered where Jim was. Our pilot. We didn't hear from him. And of course the others. We didn't know that they'd been killed.

T: You found out later I take it?

C: Found out later.

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 368.

T: Let's talk about Sagan. This is the place you spent quite a long time.

C: Quite a long time.

T: When you first got there to the camp, think in your mind's eye. What kind of impression did this camp make as you're coming into it to you?

C: It was pretty colorless, drab. They had a playing field where they played ball. They had a water storage tank, which they called a swimming pool. Which it wasn't. That was an emergency water supply in case of fire. They had a cookhouse and a building which they allowed the English to take the Red Cross parcel boxes that the parcels came in and they could make seats. For some kind of an auditorium so they could put on plays and things.

T: Now you were at first in the North Camp, which I think you mentioned earlier before this taping began, as being primarily British POWs.

C: Oh, yes. It was all RAF [Royal Air Force].

T: As an American in this camp, how well, from your perspective, did the Brits and the Americans get along?

C: Oh, very well. As I say, they were so kind. They gave me a pair of pajamas. My roommates gave me a toothbrush and tooth powder. Just were very kind. Were interested in talking to an American, I think. And we had several Americans in that camp. In fact our, one of our senior officers was A. T. Clark. He was a lieutenant colonel and he was a West Pointer, and it was he whom they took into their confidence to explain what the X activity was. That meant tunnels. And any outside contact with Britain.

T: I see. And these Brits had been POWs for quite a while.

C: Oh, yes. And they were very knowledgeable. They were very good with diplomacy with the Germans. They would speak right up. Americans were not as good that way. Americans were better in making things like little tin cans, little ovens, that we could cook in and cook our food in.

T: Hands on technical stuff.

C: Very much better. And we actually made a radio when we got into the South Camp which was just a remarkable piece of work. Out of nothing.

T: So there was a technical skill from the Americans that you observed and the British more the kind of diplomatic skills.

C: For instance, this Tim Whalen, who could copy the German script into what they called the *Ausweiskarte* [ID card], which civilians had to have for their passes. And he did it with a Prang watercolor brush. He was remarkable. In fact the Germans, when they had confiscated some of these things on their searches, had a museum of artwork and artifacts taken from the prisoners and were also very impressed with what could be done.

(1, B, 411)

T: Talk about the Germans at the camp. You were there at the North Camp and then the South Camp later. What kind of impression did the German guards make on you?

C: We had two classifications. We had the people who were in charge, an *Oberfeldwebel* and his name was Galottevich, and he was a *Wehrmacht* [German Army]. They didn't use their *Luftwaffe* personnel for the running the camp. They used the *Wehrmacht*.

T: So they used army and not air force personnel.

C: Right. He was a very fair minded man. He was very stern. And then we had the level of fellows which were called the ferrets, and they were in the blue jumpsuits, and the reason they were is they would climb under the blocks of the huts.

T: Your huts were up on blocks?

C: The first floor was raised, and they had an opening where they could climb in and there would be a space where they could climb in to see what was going on. There was a cement center where the cookstove stood, and there were the foundations around. But they were always looking for some tunnel connection.

T: Sure. You knew these ferrets were out there.

C: We had a system for knowing everyone that came in the camp. We'd place a jug a certain way to know how many goons were in. We called them goons. We had a system to know because when we were making things, like uniforms or carving a gun out of bed boards to try an escape attempt, we couldn't be caught doing it or they'd all go in the cooler. Meaning they'd put them in solitary confinement. So when they would come in the camp they would go immediately to where the workshops were. For escape material and hide it all back in the walls. We had taken walls apart and used it for storage of contraband stuff.

T: I see. Let me ask, before I move on, about the German guards. The German guards that you saw every day, for example for roll call, what kind of interaction was there between prisoners and guards?

C: For the officer guards they would come in to make an *Appel*, a roll call. Maybe sometimes, if there was trouble, there would be as much as five times a day. Always twice a day. Mostly three times a day. They would line us up on the parade ground and they would count and he would have maybe a corporal helping him. This man usually would be a captain. We'd call him Herr Peeper. And when he would come in we would say, "*Guten Morgen*, Herr Peeper." And he would say, "*Guten Morgen*" and then they would start their counting. And then if we were covering for somebody who was hiding for an escape we would have a system of shifting so we would be counted twice to cover his absence.

T: Were there guards that were enlisted guards that were around, and that you came into closer contact with or not really?

C: Some of the people did [have contact with the guards], in order to get things that we were not permitted to have. Because the guards were so eager to have cigarettes. They had lots of English cigarettes, and that was our currency.

T: The guards could be bought for certain things.

C: They [the guards] could be bought. Yes. And they would just love to get those cigarettes. And they would bring in paper and they would bring in things that we needed.

T: All guards?

C: No. No. Not all of them.

T: How do you know which guards?

C: Once we had them tamed, then we had them, because they knew that if we would expose them they would go to the Eastern Front.

(1, B, 452)

T: So it was kind of a poker game in a way.

C: It was.

T: If you wanted something but they... they wanted something, but you could also expose them.

C: And then we got a chocolate bar in our parcels. Full of nutrients. It wasn't a regular chocolate bar. And we'd get coffee. And they hadn't seen any coffee for years. So those things were very, very tempting.

T: So there were things that you could trade to them.

C: Yes. Yes.

T: What about the barracks you were in? Either North Camp or South Camp. Paint a picture of those.

C: They were just, sort of like what I could consider a motel would be in this country, although very crudely built. And there was what they called a *Kachelofen* in each room, which was a big tile stove. We never once put a fire in it because there was no fuel. And in the wintertime it was very cold, and if it weren't for the body heat, I don't know what we would have done. We did have a cook stove in one room in the center of the barrack, and that did have some poor quality coal. And sometimes some wood. Because we would take turns cooking our meals on this stove. But many times we used our own little private stoves.

T: That you made yourself?

C: Yes. And we would use little bits of paper. You'd be surprised what you can do with a sheet of paper. You can cook a whole meal with a sheet of paper.

T: So you become in a sense kind of technically minded.

C: Oh, my! We would get a loaf of bread and there was a bread slicer. It was a big wheel, sharp wheel. And the bread would come just very, very thin. It would collapse in your hand. And there would be crumbs. Then we would save those crumbs and get out the cards and see who would get the crumbs.

T: Talk about the food. How many meals a day?

C: In the morning we had just a piece of that bread with probably a little jam on it and some weak tea. It wasn't tea at all—it was just sassafras or whatever. We didn't know what it was. But it was warm. And that's all we had for breakfast. Then at noon we'd have some soup, and it was just awful.

T: Who made the soup, the Germans?

C: Yes. They made it in the cookhouse. And they would come and we had the bread and we had sausage and we had the smelly cheese that came from the market [but] was not saleable. Many of the fellows didn't like the cheese, but I learned to like it. Then of course our Red Cross parcels. But the parcels we'd get a period of time we'd

get half parcels and we'd get quarter parcels. When we got to [the camp at] Moosburg we found that the commandant was stealing all of our parcels.

T: How often do you remember getting Red Cross packages there at Sagan?

(1, B, 488)

C: I suppose we got maybe once every two weeks.

T: And you mentioned getting half or a quarter and not a whole to yourself.

C: Oh, absolutely. Oh, no. I had had some experience in cooking, so I was asked if I would do the cooking. They would do all the cleaning. They'd go to get the hot water. They'd do whatever needed to be done and do the dishes and so on. So I did because the guys, some of them, had absolutely no idea about food at all. And sometimes they would drop it on the floor. We'd have to eat the food with sand in it. So I said, look, we can't do this anymore. If you want me to do this I'll do it. I had learned to cook as a child, because my mother was an invalid. So I took it over. I made a lot of things out of almost nothing. I made pie out of mashed potatoes and I had millet. We'd grind it to get the gluten. I'd make sort of a crust for the pie.

I wish I could show you what I had made for the Christmas thing. I actually made a form with turkey legs and the turkey, because we had had cans as a Christmas present, from America. Cans of actually turkey meat. Then I made a stuffing out of bread crumbs and mashed potatoes and put it inside, and then laid the turkey in this form and the drumsticks, they looked like egg beaters. Then I covered the whole thing with this dough that I made from millet seed and dried milk and potatoes and baked it. And it looked really quite like a real turkey, and we had guys coming to our door wanting to see the bird.

T: That's quite creative, Mr. Woehrle.

C: Yes.

T: The time you spent in camp, the food sounds like it was something that was on peoples' minds.

C: All the time.

T: You got food but not quite enough of it, the way I hear you talking.

C: Well, we didn't get any eggs. We didn't get any vegetables. We didn't get any meat. No fish. We got canned food and we got Spam. Spam. And they would always puncture every can. So when we would open the Spam the mildew would have gone down about that far (*holds index finger and thumb an inch apart*) into the meat. It looked gray. But I do think that the fuzz on top would be eaten by the fellows because they were so hungry, and I think it must have had some penicillin in it,

because I still marvel that we didn't have an outbreak of some infectious disease. But we didn't.

T: How was your health [during] the time, almost a year and a half, that you were at Sagan?

C: I had a very bad stomach upset one time and I had to go to what they called the *Lazarette*. We had remarkable health. We were weak and we lost a lot of weight but, as I say, it was just a marvel that we didn't really have an epidemic of some kind. But there was none.

T: How about your own weight? How much did you weigh when you went into Sagan and how much when you came out of Moosburg?

C: I think maybe I was about 175 and probably about 134 or 140.

T: So you lost a good bunch of weight.

C: Oh, yes. And we didn't realize how much until we got into Camp Lucky Strike and they put us in the showers and we could see each other's bodies and we could count ribs and the vertebrae in the back. We could see the pelvic bone.

T: So you lost some weight.

C: Oh, yes.

T: Let me move on to talking about Sagan. You were there for a long time. What was the daily routine like? In other words, how did you spend your time?

(1, B, 532)

C: I was busy [every day] trying to decide what I could put together for a meal. And we did have rutabagas in season, and cabbage. But we found out that when the honey wagon man would come in to pump out the *Aborts*, which were the toilets, and they were toilets that were built over a great big cistern and he would pump those and it looked like a big, round—it looked like in the early days when you'd see a street sprinkler. It looked like that kind of a thing.

One day, one of our officers was out going to the cemetery. One of the boys had died. And he saw the honey wagon go out, and it went down and emptied its load in the cabbage patches. And the rutabagas that had been growing. And he said, "Now look, our cabbage and kohlrabi are being fertilized by our own excrement."

Now there is a danger there—we could get the bubonic plague or whatever it is. He said, "You're going to have to eat it at your own risk, I guess." But we just put it together. Say, well, if we'd been eating when we didn't know it and nobody got sick... So we continued to use it. But we didn't have it all year round, because it was out of season in the winter.

T: Yes.

C: We had no tomatoes, no citrus, no anything.

T: So there were certain cravings for food.

C: Oh! I got a parcel from home. I asked my mother, please send some spices. And she did. Oh, and I knew what to do with spices. Because I used to bake bread and rolls at home and everything. Every week. In the bottom of the box she had sent sort of a Sunday supplement, and there was a General Mills ad for Bisquick on the bottom with a beautiful big color picture of a strawberry shortcake. So we cut it out and we posted it on the wall. The guys would go up to that and they'd start to salivate and it would shoot right out of their mouths and their stomachs would start to growl. The salivation. It just drooled. They'd drool from looking at that shortcake. So we had to take it down.

T: What else did people do to pass the time of day?

C: We had a fairly good library that came in from Geneva and we did a lot of reading. I read a lot of good things. I read Dostoevsky, which I would never have done. I read the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I read a lot of Shestam Ward books. We had a couple Catholic boys in the camp, and they seemed to be better read than we Protestants. So I decided I would read about what the Catholic Church was about, and we had a wonderful priest that had come from Quebec; he was French. He spoke French. And he gave us a course on the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and I was one of two Protestants in that class. He was so cute. I had a lot of questions as a Protestant so he would come afterwards. He would tap me on the head and he would say (*with a French accent*), "It is all right. You, I think, will go to heaven, my little heretic."

T: So there was an exchange of knowledge here among the prisoners?

C: Oh, yes. We had classes.

T: Any kind of sports activities?

C: Yes. Very much so. We had basketball and we had... I don't remember football particularly, but they did soccer and high jump and that sort of thing.

(1, B, 581)

T: Which did you participate in yourself?

C: I was not very athletically inclined because I was so busy with my cooking. I would walk the perimeter which we could do. But we had limits. We would put a

stick, there was white rock between the wire and the next wire and then the big wire and that was electrified, and if we would put a step the guard would shoot. Just like that. Several guys got shot at. And one guy got killed.

T: Did people pass away or get killed there at Sagan?

C: Yes they did. They did. We had one fellow who became mental, and we tried to help him as much as we could.

T: What happened to him? I mean, what drove him over the edge?

C: Just the boredom, and I think maybe bad news from home. That's one thing parents should not have done, is relay that news. Family news. They should not have done that. Because people would go into depressions. But this man, he would wash his hands all the time and he would have repetitive actions which were not normal. So the Germans took him out and they said he died of something, but I know they killed him.

T: What else did prisoners die from, from your experience?

C: They died from maybe an accident, or they were shot. A Scotsman was shot on the wire, which was shown in the film *The Great Escape* [1968]. I saw that happen. My pilot finally came in, in November [1943]. He had been with the Resistance, and somebody turned him in for a bounty. When he came to my camp I hardly knew him because he had been in the Frens Prison in Paris. But he then had a very serious stomach thing and was operated on in the *Lazarette* without anesthesia.

T: What happened to him finally?

C: He came into my room early one morning and he said his stomach... So I had to go to the lager and I had to call off the dogs, because the *Hundeführer* was in and I said I have a sick man. I said, "*Nicht schiessen*. We have a man who is very sick." And poor Jim. His stomach was just like a rock. Finally they got him in and this man happened to be in the *Lazarette* and he was a French prisoner and he had done some surgery as an assistant. They opened him up. What had happened was through hunger he had an ulcer that ulcerated and went through his stomach and the gastric juices had done into the abdomen and peritonitis was setting in. So he opened him up. He slit him open both ways and poured pail after pail of warm water in his abdomen. The blood and water went off the table and out the door and he said the have no penicillin but he said, "I have a private stock of sulfanilamide." He had some stainless steel wire and he had no anesthesia and he could not join the flat muscles, but he closed the skin and used—you know when you go to the grocery store and you have these little twist things?

T: Twist ties. Yes.

C: He twist tied his skin with this wire. Steel wire. And he survived it. He was there long enough for his skin to heal, and when he came back the thing had ruptured and he had a soccer ball on his stomach. Then the protecting power came in from Geneva and declared that he had to go home. So he was sent home on the *Gripsholm*, which was the Red Cross ship.

T: And he survived the war?

(1, B, 630)

C: He survived it. He was sent to San Antonio Federal Hospital and they repaired his stomach beautifully. And he came to see me last August here. He came to see me, and I hadn't seen him for fifty-eight years when I picked him up at the airport. He wanted to see me. He got home last September, then went in for a checkup at the VA and they found he was full of cancer. He died last January.

T: For you, Mr. Woehrle, what was the most difficult aspect of your time at Sagan?

C: I didn't go into a depression. There were days that seemed endless to me. In the winter particularly. They were so cold. I got hypothermia. At night I would have to put everything I owned, socks, underwear, a jacket. I would have to put it all on my bed.

And then it was terrible to get a night's sleep, because they would request bed boards for the tunnels. They'd take them, and we'd have a hard time finding a comfortable way to sleep. My arm would go to sleep. My leg would go to sleep and it was very uncomfortable. But we were uncomfortable in the winter. Very uncomfortable.

T: Mostly due to the cold it sounds like.

C: Due to the cold. I would get chills. I remember that. And then the dullness of everything.

T: A sense of boredom?

C: Boredom. The sameness. It would snow. It was very cold. It was just like Minnesota weather and we would get a lot of snow. A lot of cold. We'd stand out for *Appell*. I thought I'd freeze to death with the wind that would come up. And of course the activities. The library was a good place to go to read, and we could check books out. I did that.

T: Which helped with the boredom, it sounds like.

C: Yes. And then I would watch the French people. They were doing pettippoint [embroidery]. They were making handbags for their people at home. I said to Elizabeth, I think that what I could do, I think I could do pettippoint. I mean I could

do needlepoint, but I don't think I could do the pettpoint. So she sent me this. I said it would be good in October to make my pettpoint, which she sent. And the fellows were so mad at me when I opened that box that finally came after six months. There was no food but all this yarn. Because they expected it would be food.

T: Sure.

C: [reading from notes made in 1945] "Begun in October and into November. I had to put it aside until after Christmas because of the cold. I could only work during the mid-days because of the light. I couldn't work at night."

T: Keep reading from your notes.

C: "And resumed work in January when the sudden evacuation of Sagan came like a thunderbolt. I packed the piece in my pack together with the skeins of wool. This was carried on my back during the historic march. On arrival at Moosburg, Bavaria I began work again February 4, 1945, and worked continually until it was completed on March 24. The period January 27, date of evacuation of Sagan, in *Niederschlesien* [Lower Saxony], through March 21 was the most grim of our entire period of activity. This needlepoint absorbed many of these cold, hungry hours and it served as a great distraction and helped me to relax and occupy my mind. At this writing we are anxious and hopeful for a sudden end to the war, and the needlepoint will take number one place in my pack."

T: So needlepoint was a way that you occupied your time it sounds like.

C: Do you want to pause and I'll show you.

(pause to examine needlepoint)

T: Outside of a chronological format, some things I wanted to ask you about. For example, friends. Did you have close friends when you were at Sagan?

(1, B, 700)

C: Well, we were close because we were together all the time. [All the time. Sleeping, eating, talking.] I said it was as close as the holy bonds of matrimony. You just never did get—the one thing that we missed was privacy. We had no privacy. Sometimes just to be alone we would walk the perimeter [of the camp], and if we knew someone that we particularly enjoyed we'd walk with him. Someone we enjoyed visiting. I did have a friend, Paul Flitenger, that I liked very much, and we would walk together.

T: Hadn't thought about the privacy issue. You were together with people twenty-four hours a day.

C: All the time. Sleeping, eating, talking.

T: Whether you liked them or not.

C: But we did have a very agreeable group, and they were so pleased that I would do the cooking so I was very, I sort of mothered them.

T: As people stay together, from your observation, what kind of things led to disagreements among men?

C: I don't remember much disagreements. I never saw a fight. In our room anyway. Poor Tiny. He was six foot four, and he was so hungry. They'd give us rotten potatoes and I cut the rotten part out. He would ask me if he could have the rotten potatoes. And that gray stuff from the top of the Spam which I would cut off. He would ask if he could have that. I felt so sorry. Sometimes I would give him a little more. In fact, I [gave him] part of mine, because you start cutting up portions of ten people of whatever you're making and I tell you, you've got to be pretty careful that they're all alike.

T: Could that cause a sense of irritation if people felt the portions weren't the same?

C: Yes. But they knew that I was fair with them and they didn't say, hey, Charlie, you gave Joe more than you gave me. That didn't happen. But I tell you, hunger is so overwhelming. It occupies a great deal of your thought.

T: One might think that you've got --

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: You know, Mr. Woehrle, you mentioned about what occupies peoples' minds. Here we have a group of young men, and one could well imagine their thoughts would be not about food but generally about women. What about that?

C: There were pinups of course. Mostly on the airplanes. They would have like the *Memphis Belle* or... There would always be some nude girl or something to do with the erotic aspect, but in the camp there was very little talk of that.

T: How do you explain that?

C: I think we were so preoccupied with survival. We had very little sexual discussions. I don't recall. And there was no nudity at all. These guys were real gentlemen. They were educated.

T: You were all officers, weren't you?

C: Yes. We had a religious aspect there. Padre Mack would have a service every Sunday. The little auditorium that we had built and furnished, it would be filled with people for the service.

T: So from your recollection the church service was pretty well attended.

C: Oh, [The service] always [was well attended].

(2, A, 15)

T: By you included?

C: I would play the hymns.

T: Because you could play the piano.

C: Yes.

T: How important for you was your own faith in getting through this ordeal?

C: The thing, as I said, when my parachute opened I said the Lord's Prayer instinctively. I'd been raised in the church as a child, and when I got to college though I was taking philosophy and we had a teacher or a professor who wrote the book who seemed to take kind of potshots at the simplicity of anything that would be Christian faith. He couldn't understand that. But that was the only negative thing that I had run into. But over there, there was a lot of discussion maybe of church history, but not so much of personal conversion type of talk. Didn't hear much of that.

T: Would you consider yourself more religious at the end of your POW experience than before or not?

C: Oh, I think so. I'd been raised in the Methodist Sunday School and our family always said grace at meals and we said our night prayers and things like that. So that was pretty part of my life. And I would say yes, I was more because I was so thankful that I had lived through this.

T: So you made a link between your own faith and perhaps the presence of God and your own survival of the ordeal.

C: Oh, yes. Very much so. But then curiously enough, I became an elder of a Presbyterian church later in my life and even after that I had a very wonderful conversion experience at age thirty-eight. Which has served me ever since. Now here we're Episcopalian. Our daughter married an Episcopalian. She taught in the Episcopalian school at Breck. So we became one family in the church and even now I'm the one that plays the hymns at our church services.

T: So your knowledge of music has stayed with you.

C: Yes. I still do it. Yes.

T: Let me move to another topic, and that is news about the outside world. Sagan is not necessarily a big city or even near a big city. How much news were you able to get about the outside world? Say about how the war was going.

C: Well, first of all, a copy of the *Völkische Beobachter* [Nazi Party] newspaper, would come in.

T: Regularly?

C: Yes. We couldn't depend on it. Depends on when they would bring it in. But we would see that and, of course, the headlines were all that Germany was winning the war and awful things. I remember there was a group of guys called the *Murder Verein*, Murder Inc., it was called. They made a big thing about that. How the United States was actually out to murder people in wartime. And of course it was all negative. Then the crooner, the blue-eyes, Sinatra. They had a picture of him with tousled hair and he was hanging onto a microphone, and he was just a little thin kid in those days. They said, "This is the hero of America." This sort of gangly thin young fellow with his hair tousled and so on.

T: So Frank Sinatra in the *Völkische Beobachter*.

C: Yes.

(2, A, 50)

T: Boy, there's an interesting twist.

C: So anyway, then after a while though, there were no papers. And when the rail lines got bombed the food wasn't getting to us. And when we got on that thing to go to Moosburg it was just terrible from then on. We had no food. We had no letters. We had nothing.

T: From June of 1943 to when you left Sagan in January of 1945, obviously Germany's fortunes went continually backward.

C: Yes.

T: How aware could you be of that then?

C: We made a radio. We made it out of... A fellow walked in with a heated [flight] suit, and the Germans didn't see that there was a connector at the ankle. He had

pulled it off. Fortunately. Here he walks in with this beautiful, beautiful strand of copper wire. And we then got resin from the trees. We had a little oleo lamp, and we insulated that wire by running it through a hot resin and winding it on a core that we had put up in the speaker. We cut a table knife into two pieces and then so many windings and the wire we made out of the foil that cigarettes came in and folded it in newspaper and put it up in the rafters. That was our aerial.

T: How well did this little radio work?

C: We made earphones. We made earphones out of these magnetisms and a little piece of... And we even made a crystal. We sent a guy to the *Lazarette* and said he had a skin eruption and a piece of sulfur would be the only thing that would help him. He gave a little yellow piece of sulfur, and we had saved the drips off of the cans. In the old days when they would seal a can of food, vacuum pack, there would always be a little drop of solder. We would save those solder drops. And we got a ball about this big.

T: Like baseball size.

C: And we then took the clay out of the ground and dried it and made a crucible and baked it in the oven so it could be reheated. We put it in cold and we melted the lead, dropped in the sulfur and it went puff! And we just let it get cold and then after it was totally cool we hit it with a hammer or a rock or something and it broke open and there was the crystal.

T: Wow! Very interesting.

C: I don't know where the brass pin came from, but that was the crystal set. We tied it up to the earphones, to the aerials and we got BBC. And we hid it in an accordion bellows.

T: Was this a radio that most people knew about or just a few people knew about?

C: No. Well, we had a guy who could speak German. He was from Little America, Norwood, Minnesota. He would go around. The British called it the Jan is up. That meant the news. We would crowd into a room and he would say, "This is what we have just heard on the radio. We're winning the war. Don't let them fool you. Don't read those... Those headlines are no good."

T: Did the news that you were getting then, did this help to bring a sense of optimism?

C: Oh, optimism, I should say so. And then we would see big flotillas of planes flying over. After a while they took off the green exterior. The B-17 we had was sort of an olive drab. Then they got rid of all the weight because what was the advantage? And then we'd see these gleaming silver B-17s go over. We knew something was up.

T: So after a while you could see the war changing.

C: Oh, yes, we could. And then of course I was there over a year before D Day.

T: Yes. That's right. Let's shift to the end, because you leave Sagan in January of 1945. Leading up to that, what kind of rumors were around about what might happen to you?

C: We had rumors. The reason they marched us out was because they wanted to negotiate with the Americans, because they felt that the end was coming too. We were negotiable. And Patton said if you move any prisoners we will destroy your villages, men, women and children. Because they were going to take us into the Alps and destroy us once they found that we were nonnegotiable.

T: So there were all sorts of rumors around.

C: Yes. We started making little sleds and so forth to carry our things if we were going to go into the mountains. We'd try to get away from them.

T: Were there rumors of an evacuation or did the Germans tell you, you were going to be leaving?

C: There were rumors. In fact, they sent out a handbill, a notice, if we would join with them to fight Russia. Did you ever see one of those?

T: I've heard about those, yes. So they actively sought your participation.

C: I had a copy of it once. I don't know what happened to it.

T: Now rumors. You had news on one hand, rumors on the other.

C: Yes.

T: How do you square those?

C: The thing, when Patton came in and liberated us [at Moosburg] on this wonderful day. We were sitting out there and we heard this low boom boom, and we said to the ground troops, they were from Africa, they were Englishmen. We said, "You're artillery, you're ground guys, infantry, what's going on? What is this boom?" They said, "It's probably rear action. The Germans are pulling back." Well, all of a sudden, right in the middle of this we see, look down in the *Platz* [main square], and we see a white plume of smoke. Rear action my foot!

T: And you were right close to the village, weren't you?

C: Yes. Somebody is firing on Moosburg. And sure enough, what we saw after a while were little brown things moving on the hills, the foothills. They were Sherman tanks full of sandbags. Finally we saw a command car come in. Of course in the *Platz* was a big flagpole with a big swastika flying. So we saw this command car come up and by this time we were hanging on the fence and we noticed that the guards had left the towers. And we were watching closely and then another big—first of all there were two hits. White smoke. Then the command car came in and we saw that this flag was coming down and as we noticed—I had a little Scotsman on the left. We were both watching this. Up goes this thing and it was a four times bigger American flag took the air.

T: So you had a visual of things before you saw the Americans at your camp.

C: Oh! Oh, it was absolutely overwhelming. This little Scottish fellow looked at me. He said, (*Scottish brogue*) “Laddie, I don’t want to sound unpatriotic, but that’s the bloodiest finest flag I’ve ever seen.” And he was crying and tears going down his cheeks. It was a huge moment.

T: Getting to Moosburg was an event, too, wasn’t it? Let’s move to the march out of Sagan. Why don’t you describe that march out of Sagan in January 1945 from your own perspective?

(2, A, 134)

C: Well, fortunately we stayed together as our room. Eight of us. We each had some food that we stashed. So they’d bring what they could and wherever I could build a little fire I would make some food for them. We did freeze our feet. It was the lowest point of my experience.

T: In what way?

C: Well, because we were so cold. I could hardly move. Finally we got into a barn one night. The German barns are arranged—the house is here, door, the cows are here, a door, a feed thing is here, the machinery is here and so on. The hay is here and so on and so on. When they close the gate at night then you have an enclosure. So they’d put us in places like that at night. I was at the barn in the hay. We were trying to keep warm. This is cold, cold weather.

T: It’s January, right?

C: Yes. And I saw a light come out from under this. I was walking by and I thought, what do you suppose that is? So the guards were asleep, and they were older men. You know we used to carry their rifles. They were having such a hard time. So I opened the door and there I saw a young woman milking cows. And I went in and I had a little tin on me of compressed oatmeal. Came from New Zealand.

T: From one of the Red Cross packages.

C: Yes. From one of the Red Cross packages. So I said to her, "*Bitte, wir sind sehr hungrich und kalt. Bitte*, will you give us some milk." And she said, "*Bitte*." I said could we have a *Kessel* [cooking pot] I have some *Mehl* [flour] I said to make a porridge. And she said, "Ja." I stood there. She went in the kitchen. She got a kettle. She took the kettle, put it between her legs and milked the cow into the kettle. About this much milk.

T: So about eight to ten inches high in the thing.

C: Yes. She took that and she took my [oatmeal] and she put brown sugar in and some salt and stirred it and cooked it. Now each of us carried a tin cup which was always with us which we had made ourselves. Because on the road sometimes some of the German housewives would have like a milk can of water for us. So each had ours. So when I came with this hot oatmeal, Sam Durance, the guy that died on the yacht, he said to me later, he said, "Charlie, I thought I had seen an angel when you brought that oatmeal." First of all it was warm, hot. And we all had enough and the first time we had a stomach full of anything. And we all went to sleep. So then I took, when it was through, she told me when I was through I could put it by the door where the cows were. And I did. That was the story. And he wrote this up later, Sam did.

T: You had this interaction with a German woman. Just the two of you, right?

C: Yes. Just the two of us.

T: How long were you together? I mean it sounds like a number of minutes.

C: We were. We were. I stayed in the kitchen with her because I knew I was perfectly safe. Those guards wouldn't have done anything anyway. It was in the middle of the night and they were keeping warm themselves.

T: Was it possible to communicate with a little bit of German back and forth?

(2, A, 195)

C: No. She was too busy taking care of me. We didn't discuss anything.

T: Happy to have the food from here in any case.

C: Oh!

T: Now this march. You marched out of Sagan to the town of Spremberg, it looks like, to get a train?

C: Yes. That's when we got on those terrible boxcars and some of them, they just shoveled out manure. And I said to the boys, "I just saw a wet car. Let's avoid one of those." So we got into...

T: How long, how many days did you march? Estimate that.

C: I'd say we were two nights and three days.

T: Any other cases of interaction with German civilians? You mentioned that woman. Any other time that you interacted with them either for food or an overnight?

C: No. Yes. In Moosburg when I stayed in that apartment with a guy from Hibbing.

T: But not on this march.

C: No. Not on the march. Only when they would have some warm water for us to drink.

T: You saw that more than once?

C: A couple of times that happened, as we marched through these villages.

T: You had guards with you.

C: Oh, yes.

T: You mentioned you noticed they were older men.

C: Yes. And they also had Doberman pincher dogs and German shepherds to keep us in line.

T: What was the mood on that march? Was it one fear that you were going to be left behind or killed or...

C: It was one of, will we ever get to the end of this. Oh! In fact I was so stooped over I didn't think I'd ever stand up straight again. And then we got into a glass factory in [the town of] Muskau and it was there that I found a piece of iron and they found something and I built a fire inside this building, which was unoccupied. We had some pancake mix and I made pancakes.

T: So you were looking for ways constantly to make, a place to make food...

C: Yes. Yes. And that was the low point when I didn't think I even wanted to live.

T: So this march was the lowest point for you.

C: Lowest point. The lowest point.

T: Back to the march from Sagan. You mentioned that being the low point. How much did the weather impact that for you?

C: The weather was very cold. And when they would stop for relief stops they would stop the train in an open area where it was blowing. They wouldn't dare stop in a wooded place because they were afraid people would escape. Oh! Boy!

(2, A, 233)

T: How long were you on the train there from...

C: We were there from late in the afternoon of one day, one night, two nights. One night, the next day, the next night, the next day. Then we got sidetracked because of a bombing and we finally got to Moosburg. And we stayed a night in Moosburg too, and I stayed in a barn. What was his name—who was our ambassador to the court of St. James? John... He and I slept in the gutter of a barn with some straw that night before we went into the camp at VII-A [Moosburg]. That was the most horrible place.

T: Talk about the train ride first. Boxcars this time, right?

C: Yes. But it was just awful. We couldn't sit down comfortably. There were too many of us. The guy sitting would spread his legs, the next guy, next guy, next guy. There was no windows. People would throw up and they'd have toilet problems. It would be just awful.

T: So there would be no toilet facilities on the train.

C: No. None. No water. They would throw in a loaf of bread and some sausage. We'd have to try and divide it the best we could.

T: How did that go?

C: It was pretty awful.

T: Was the train attacked at all by aircraft?

C: No. But it could have been. It could have been.

T: But from your recollection it wasn't.

C: Everything was so circuitous. They had to sidetrack for other trains and we were sitting for a long time doing nothing. I think we were three days at least.

T: A couple nights you mentioned. Your transportation was not a priority as far as the German rail system.

C: Oh, heavens no! I should say not. Not a priority. No.

T: So the lack of food and water, the sanitation facilities, difficulty in standing, sitting or sleeping. Sounds like it makes that a pretty difficult, horrific experience, the train ride.

C: That's right. Yes.

T: Did some people handle that train ride psychologically better than others?

C: Yes. Those of us who banded together with food, did the best. Some handled it better than others, yes. There wasn't much talk. It was a case of survival that you just... You've seen pictures of Jews in those bunks. You wonder, why aren't they doing something? The situation is so overwhelming there is nothing to do. You can't go anywhere. There's no food. There's no distraction. It's dark.

T: So in a way, if somebody might look at pictures of the men in the train and say why weren't you protesting or...? What you're saying is it just kind of defeats you down to the bottom level.

(2, A, 295)

C: That's what it did. Yes. The bottom level. And I didn't really care if I lived or died at that point.

T: Now that's a point where your optimism you mentioned before has really gone away.

C: It was because I was finding that with my feet frozen or freezing and the hypothermia and hunger, it was all just crushing me in a way that I'd never experienced before.

T: How did you keep your head above water, Mr. Woehrle?

C: I suppose we knew that the end had to come and we knew that we were winning the war. And it was a fact that we just had to hold out and stick together and use what we had left in our—what meager rations we had.

T: So focusing on the ultimate end.

C: Yes. Now these pictures I showed you of the guys waiting. It's just survival. We had nothing.

T: You spent several months at Moosburg VII-A there in southern Bavaria.

C: Yes.

T: How was this camp different from Sagan?

C: We had organization at Sagan. We had no organization here.

T: What kind of impression did Moosburg make on you when you got there in January?

C: We realized that it was just a survival place. It was a real concentration camp. There were thousands. They came from all over the world. We had Indians that wore turbans and we had Africans. We had everything. Everything.

T: How did you make your way in there? Did you sort of find a barracks? Were you assigned to one?

C: We found one. At night. We'd have to go to the toilet, urinate. There was a can in the entrance. That thing would overflow and go down the steps and the abort itself was in a sea of urine and was so loaded with excrement that we had to—it was just impossible. That's the way the Russians had left it. The Russians were the next camp just over the fence and they were a very rough bunch as I recall.

T: So the Russians were separated from your group.

C: They had evacuated our place. Left it so messy.

T: So you were in a formerly Russian compound at Moosburg.

C: Yes. And it was full of fleas.

T: Was that the first time you had problems with bugs or did you have those at...

C: We didn't have fleas in Stalag III. No.

T: No lice. No fleas.

C: No. No.

T: Moosburg was different.

C: Oh! Entirely.

T: So you've got lice and fleas and things to deal with.

C: Oh, yes. We didn't have lice. We had fleas. They jump.

(2, A, 341)

T: How did the food situation do there?

C: There was no... I tell you, I just wonder what we did. I didn't see any distribution of food really. Some of the parcels must have gotten in. I don't know how we... We'd get potatoes, I think from the Germans, and we would get some kind of a broth. It had tallow in it.

T: Was there bread distribution at this point?

C: Yes. There was bread, but there wasn't enough. That's why I was going to go to town to get some [after the camp was liberated]. Then when Patton came in, they said they promised a kitchen so they could make semolina. Because they knew that our stomachs would... They threw out K rations from the Sherman tanks and the fellows ate some of it and they got sick right away.

T: Your stomachs weren't ready for that, were they?

C: No.

T: How did you pass the time there at Moosburg?

C: I think just trying to get something to eat and keep warm.

T: It was three months you spent there just about, wasn't it?

C: Yes. Yes, it was.

T: So staying warm, finding food. You mentioned fairly good relations between prisoners at Sagan.

C: Yes. There was. I think that we had good relations all the way through. The only fights I remember were some of the southern boys. This is back at Stalag Luft III. They would fight over issues of the Civil War. They were still fighting the Civil War over again.

T: Things from the past.

C: Yes.

T: Was theft a problem from each other at Sagan or at Moosburg? People stealing from each other.

C: Yes. We saw some of that. We saw one --

End of Tape 2, Side A. Tape 2, Side B begins at counter 373.

T: Let's move to the liberation of Moosburg. You've talked a little bit about that. It was the end of April 1945. How aware were you that an end might be near?

C: We saw some midsize airplanes fly over. They could have been a P-38 [Lightning fighter plane] or something like that. Then finally we saw a fighter plane, a Thunderbolt maybe, and we knew that the end was near. Of course then when we saw the tanks come in and saw that flag go up, then it was, for us, it was over. And then Patton came right in. And I had a visit with him.

T: Talk about that.

(2, B, 378)

C: He was just like a mother hen saying this was pretty awful place here but we'll take care of you and don't give up and don't go out on your own. He said we had a nurse the other day who went out [and] some children came up to her. They wanted some chewing gum because they hadn't had any chewing gum. And she reached in her breast [pocket and] a youth took out a gun and shot her dead right through the forehead.

T: So you were warned not to go into town.

C: We were warned not to go out and try to get into the countryside and get home by themselves.

T: Did people adhere to that warning?

C: Not all of them.

T: How about yourself?

C: Oh, I did. We stayed with our group all the way.

T: So you stayed in the camp. You did not leave.

C: Oh, yes. Oh, indeed I did. I realized that this General Patton knew what he was talking about.

T: How did things change in the camp there? What happened when the Americans came? Was there suddenly food or was there suddenly chaos?

C: No. It wasn't chaos. We were organized and as you saw lined up ready to go out on these trucks and they moved rather quickly. They said that that's what they were going—I never saw such an efficiency as I saw with the American occupation of that town.

T: You did get into town.

C: Yes.

T: What prompted you to go into town?

C: To get bread. And I saw this American guy with a camera.

T: What were you curious about in Moosburg? I mean in a sense, here you are in a German town, no longer a prisoner of war, what interested you?

C: I was uneasy because Patton said that there would always be a danger if you're out there by yourself. But I saw this American and I hooked up with him, and we went to Dachau in his command car. He said, "I bet you'd like to have a bath." I said, "Would I ever." And a Polish fellow had attached himself, he had been a forced laborer, and there was a *Biergarten* there. Beautiful place. I suppose this guy was a beer baron or something. It was a lovely place. They had gazebos and beautiful benches and so on. It was right near the famed Dachau where they gassed the Jews. Extermination place. I have a picture of that too. But there was a metal bathtub with a firebox under it and he said, "Would you fill the tub with water for the lieutenant and get a fire going for him underneath?" I said to the man, "We have no wood." He went and got an axe and he saw one of these beautiful benches and he goes over and just busts up that whole bench, providing wood for this—and he was just like a mother hen. He heated the water. He would put his elbow in the water to see if it was the right temperature and then when it was the right temperature he pulled out the firebox and pulled it away and then let it settle. Then I had a fresh towel. I had soap for the first time in two years.

T: Holy cow! You mean you got warm water, soap and a towel.

C: (*breathlessly*) Yes!! Turkish towel. It was just a little bit of heaven.

T: Yes. So you've gone from the low point which was the march out of Sagan, and a few months later you've got a warm private bath.

C: That's right. Right out in the open too.

(2, B, 413)

T: And who cared, right?

C: Who cared? I don't think I had any fresh underwear that time, but I did when I got to Camp Lucky Strike. We got deloused there.

T: Right. You went to Camp Lucky Strike and were lucky enough then to be flown back to the United States.

C: Yes. I was interrogated there at Lucky Strike. They interrogated everybody.

T: What kind of things were you asked?

C: Did I have any X activity, and I said a little. I had learned shorthand when I was in high school because I learned to type. I took some notes in shorthand which I had when the protective power would come. When they would see these notes, when the Gestapo would come in to check our stuff, if they would say shoot America because they would see me. I was teaching this shorthand class. They could put the two together. Seeing this school work. It was more than school work. So that helped me, and the pictures were of great help.

T: So when they were interrogating you they were interested in the photographs you had taken [of Moosburg].

C: Oh, very much. But they didn't see the photographs. They saw only the film. They would only process it but they wouldn't print them. They thought Washington should do that.

T: Did they ask you about specific Germans or other prisoners? Would you call it a detailed interrogation there at Lucky Strike, or more general?

C: More general. They wanted to know would I be useful for getting ready for the Nuremberg trials. And they felt that it would, so they sent me to Paris and I waited there at the Lafayette Hotel with this guy, Davey Jones. I was going to go to Chartres to look at the cathedral there, and the girl at the desk knew me by that time because I was there almost a week. She said, "Lieutenant, orders were just cut. They just came in from General Eisenhower."

T: So you were flown back to the States. Did you receive another interrogation there?

C: Oh, boy, did I! I went to the CIC, what looked like a horse farm in Virginia. It wasn't a horse farm at all. It was the CIC. [CIC: reference unclear]

T: What did they want to know from you, Mr. Woehrle?

C: They wanted to know all about the camp. Just the things that you're asking.

T: Were they more interested in asking you about Sagan or Moosburg?

C: I think mostly they were interested in the neglect that the Germans had and the shootings, killing the Scotsman on the fence. And they shot one of the lieutenant colonels who was standing in the doorway. And generally the lack of food, lack of fuel to keep us warm in the winter. Nor did they adhere to the Geneva Convention, which they did not.

(2, B, 443)

T: How long did they talk to you?

C: They talked to me for probably a couple hours, and then I came back to Washington. When I came home they sent two men up to take depositions from me in the summertime.

T: Back home in Minnesota?

C: Yes.

T: So you talked to them more than once then.

C: Oh, yes.

T: Let's go back to Minnesota, because you got back in May 1945.

C: The eighteenth of May.

T: You were married in June, right?

C: Yes.

T: But you knew Elizabeth before you went overseas.

C: Oh, yes. I have a lot of correspondence in my box from her.

T: When you saw Elizabeth and your parents, and even your brothers and sisters, how much were they all curious to know about your POW time?

C: They were, but they didn't press me. The lawyer who was in that picture met me at that station. He was more interrogating than anyone else. Elizabeth thought he shouldn't have done that, but I didn't mind. He wanted to know, of course. Lawyers do that. But he was a good friend, so I knew that it was for just curiosity. But I was sort of in a fog.

T: So Elizabeth or your folks or your brothers and sisters, did they ask you questions about what was it like?

C: They did but I was, I suppose, I was rather forthcoming on my own. But I remember I met my old roommate. We were bombardiers. Bill Walsh, who was best man at our wedding. I met him in Chicago and we went to see a movie and it was so hard on me to see what I was seeing that I began to sweat. I sweat through all my clothes and we had to get out of there.

T: What movie was it?

C: It was a play. It was *A Bell for Adonno* and it was a war story. It was too much. I didn't lose my mind or go crazy, but I just started to perspire. I just had to get out.

T: Did your own reaction surprise you?

C: I didn't know what to expect. It was all new to me and I really didn't feel that I was suffering from anything. But as I look back I was really sort of, well, it seemed like all this was not really happening.

T: The whole POW experience, you mean?

C: No. Not that—getting home and getting adjusted. That was sort of... I just didn't realize that it was really happening.

T: Are you saying that your adjustment was a little difficult in some ways?

(2, B, 472)

C: Well, of course I was very happily married and I remember that we had a wedding trip up to northern Michigan at Traverse Bay. It was a lovely place. And this Bill, we stopped at his home in Kalamazoo and they let us take their car. I didn't have a car at that time. Then Elizabeth and I got back to St. Paul and we had trouble finding a place to live. So friends had moved to Manitou Island for the summer. A summer place there. So they let us take their house for the summer until we could find something, and we did then in the fall.

T: Was your wife curious more than other family members to know about your POW experience?

C: Well, she didn't press me. It all came out. Little bits and pieces, you know.

T: Over time you mean?

C: I tell you. The war thing generally has always made Elizabeth sad. She doesn't like to watch war movies or anything like that. Even today.

T: Did your folks or brothers and sisters become more curious over time?

C: They were very saddened when they got news that I was missing in action. No idea where I was. Was I living? Was I not living? And then when they got the news that I was a prisoner of war my mother was very relieved, and my father—everybody was relieved. That I was alive.

T: And when you came back did they want to know about what it was like?

C: They did in their way. It just came out rather easily in conversation, but they didn't just grill me as I remember.

T: But you're saying you didn't have trouble talking about it really.

C: No. Not very much. Some people apparently did, but I did not. I didn't have that problem. We were a very vocal family anyway. We were talkers.

T: So talking, open exchanges weren't something strange.

C: No. That was not hard for me. No.

T: So is it safe to say that had I asked you for an interview in 1950 or 1960 that you would have been forthcoming?

C: Oh, yes. I would have been forthcoming.

T: So it's not something you had trouble with.

C: People have said about these psychological experiences that they have, either they close down or hold it all inside. I was not built that way nor did I suffer from that.

T: So for you, talking about aspects of being a POW was never a problem.

C: Not really. I mean I was there and it was a sad moment in my life, but it didn't—just like I'm talking to you—it's not going to ruin my day.

T: Right. Good way to put it. So your military experience became something that was just part of your life but not a focus of it.

(2, B, 506)

C: It was part of my life because our country was in need and after Pearl Harbor it just electrified the country. Roosevelt and Churchill tried—Churchill tried to get Roosevelt to commit us. And we had a lot of opposition. There was a Bert Whaler of Montana that was very opposed to our getting involved and then Pearl Harbor just

(snaps fingers) did it. Just overnight. And there was no question that we were involved. So I really realized that I had been in the infantry, my early experience.

T: That's right.

C: I said, I don't want to get into any ground stuff. I'm going to volunteer so I can have a choice.

T: Mr. Woehrle, after the war did the Veterans Administration provide you help as far as physical recovery or any kind of psychological counseling?

C: Well, they were there for me but I didn't need it.

T: Have you made use of the VA since then?

C: Yes. Yes. I use them for medical things. I use them for my hearing aids. I have two hearing aids. I get my flu shots there. I'm going to get new hearing aids on the twentieth of May. So I keep in touch.

T: Have they offered or have you taken advantage of any kind of counseling or group discussions by ex-POWs?

C: Only as we gather for reunions. That's all.

T: Not through the VA though. No kind of structured...

C: No. No.

T: The last couple questions. When you think about your POW experience, what's the most important way you think that experience changed you, Charles Woehrle, or changed your life?

C: It changed me in understanding the price of liberty. It's very costly. When I think of every death that I see come on the television after some of these news programs, I sit there very reverently and thanking them for the sacrifice that they have made and it's a sacrifice for liberty. I think that if Hitler had gone to England instead of going to Russia that we may all be wearing swastikas today.

T: Interesting point. After the war too, when you think about the long term effects of change, did you have dreams or nightmares that you had about your POW experience?

C: I had none of that.

T: So nighttime disturbances weren't something that...

C: No. No. My twin brother, I didn't know where he was, but I did [finally learn] he was on Iwo Jima and he had a very hard time there with—he saw a lot of death.

T: Yes. Very different experience from your own.

C: Awful thing. Awful thing. The Japanese did...

T: Did you two talk about that kind of stuff when he got back?

C: Yes. We did. I saw some dead people, but I didn't see anything compared to what my brother saw.

T: Was it hard for him to talk about that?

C: I don't think so. We're quite alike. We're identical twins.

T: So in a sense it might have been helpful for each of you to talk to the other.

C: Yes. Yes. He's been very supportive of me. I've been always very supportive of him. And we enjoy being together.

T: Is he still alive as well?

C: Yes. He doesn't have very good health. He was a smoker and he has emphysema. I smoked for a while because of hunger over there, but I quit right after I got home.

T: Mr. Woehrle, that concludes our interview. Thank you very much for your time today.

END OF INTERVIEW