

Transcript – Dad’s talk to Kate’s Middle School Class

Kriege James MacArevey

@ April 1989

It was the Christmas of 1944 Kate, that’s the time of the year when most of these things happened. The Russians were around Warsaw, the siege of Warsaw was on, and the Germans were getting skiddish about whether they should leave the American prisoners in Poland or not.

As we got the feeling around the camp we went ahead and made this sleigh, we made it out of bed slats, you know we had bunk beds and there were wooden boards holding a bag of hay. We took the boards and made runners out of them and crossed them with other boards, so that we had a sleigh about 2 ½ feet long and about a foot and a half wide. We planned when we left, not matter how we went that we’d probably have to take that sleigh and all our stuff on it. This is what we did, this was our prior planning because everybody was feeling a little skiddish about how long we were going to stay there.

And I think it was either the 1st week or 2nd week in January of 1945 when we actually left the camp. We left it with 1500 officers and a company of German guards that lined the road alongside of us and kept us going on a straight and narrow path. We took main roads mainly because the...I mean we took back roads mainly because the main roads were filled with refugees, Germans who were being returned to Germany and being evacuated out of Poland for fear of the Russians. We marched for one full day and that night we were put into a small town, all 1500 of us and told to go find a place to sleep and they put their guards around the town, which as far as they were concerned did a good job, at least that first night.

We had been given very little to take with us in the way of food, what we had on our sleigh was stuff we’d saved from several weeks before Christmas. We had our blankets we had whatever memorabilia that we were trying to save out of the camp so we had a pretty good sleighful, when you figure we had material for three people, the three of us who went together on this, Lt Spence, Lt Secor and myself. It was cold, in the zero area, or below.

The second night on the march we decided that when they put us into a camp which they did, or a town that we weren’t going to go much further. So we had some of the other officers who were in the same building that we were in, nail us up into the eaves of the building, that’s the area between the roof and the ceilings on the side and there was several...quite a bit of room there. We took in our sleigh, we took in all the stuff we could carry including a canteen of water, something to go to the bathroom with, we just prepared ourselves to stay there for some time. When the Germans fell the comp... all of the others out the next morning, we stayed there, and they came in and fired a few pistols around the...rifles, I don’t know what they fired actually in the house cause they knew they were short people. But they had to get going, they were trying to make Germany before they got caught.

And we stayed there, we stayed there 3 days or 4 days, in that neighborhood, before we were forced out because of the cold weather, our freezing drinking water, and our freezing selves actually.

So we got out into the Polish farmyard, or no into the top of the house into the third floor. These were all big houses and there was a Polish farmer who had come back into town and was taking care of a cow in the backyard. We motioned to him, and tried to get it across to him that we were Americans in fact one of us had a small flag they carried all the way through this thing, and when he saw us up in the windows he motioned for us to stay down. He then came into the house, came up through the floor, and came up through the stairway and decided that we were as he believed, Americans. These Poles were pretty smart.

He went back again and came up a little later with a bucket of milk he had warmed over the stove, and gave it to us to drink. And then later again in the afternoon he brought up some chicken that they had cooked in the farmyard there...or in the farmhouse. He brought that up to us so that we had a good meal, it was a hot meal in fact. And told ... he told us to stay there longer and that he would let us know when it would be right to come out.

I think it was the third or fourth day, I'm not sure, after all although I've told the story a lot, it seems like it was about that length of time that a Russian Patrol came into town. He came up then and between sign language that we'd been using with the Pole and the sign language now that we were using with the Russians we got it across that we were Americans. They'd offer very little help. I did get a drink out of one of the canteens which was pure alcohol. And they told us where the Russian main forces were. And this then was where we headed.

We walked, oh, many miles, I don't know how many. We went past Warsaw which was 100 miles away. We had several experiences on the way, mainly one that almost lost our sleigh for us, which we were still dragging by the way, where a Russian vehicle with a car...with a motorcycle on the back that they were towing, swung into our sleigh and dragged it about 200 yards down the road, and all our equipment. Us chasing it of course. And they stopped, and after much harassing and arguing and neither one of us understanding each other very well, a Russian officer came along and he stopped them from doing what they were trying to do and that was I think to get rid of us, and we got our sleigh back and we kept right on walking. We were a little bit more concerned with the Russians than we were the Germans at that time because the Germans were running.

In the course of this getting away, several other groups had gotten away. We didn't know that at the time, as it turned out that this is what happened. We were never re-captured by the Germans, we were picked up the other side...by the East side of Warsaw by the Russians and put into a collection point and there we met other officers who had gotten away and some other people from other camps who had gotten away. In fact many had...I recall these things kind of haphazardly but I can even remember going to a dinner with a Polish family and a Russian officer, and a female Russian officer one evening while we were there at that camp. I don't think it got... we were too comfortable, they were not too comfortable, and the whole thing was just a mess.

We started walking again, uh how did we travel you asked me. We travelled, that part of this trip on foot. We got a couple of short rides on trucks, Russian trucks, the trucks... the Russians were using everything. They had dog sleds, they had tanks, they had trucks, they had trains. They had everything but they were all going in the wrong direction for us. We were trying to get back into Russia, in fact initially we thought we were going to head for Moscow, and I think after talking to ourselves, talking to some of the other prisoners in that

Russian camp we decided that Moscow would have been a bad spot, that was too far to go and that the best thing for us to do was to head for Odessa on the Black Sea.

Now, we of course didn't know this Odessa was not active in the sense that the Turks wouldn't let the Allied forces in there with supplies, so most of the supplies were going up through the Baltic, and the Black Sea, or the Dardenelles where the Turks controlled the entrance to the Black Sea had not been opened to Allied traffic.

The Russians of course, we were not armed, let me put it this way. We had no weapons. We had been prisoners, there was no way we could get weapons. And the Russians, from somewhere around Kiev put us on a train and rode us then most of the way to Odessa, which was in essence from that area, about 500 miles. And they'd stop every periodically and they were freight cars so they were nothing plush about it, and let us get out and stretch our legs and go to the bathroom and that kind of stuff. And they let us trade with the local Polish (Ukrainians/Russians?) people. We traded our blankets we traded a lot of our stuff to the Poles (Ukrainians/Russians?) and got bread and cheese and some of the things that they had which was not too much, but that kept us going.

And we arrived in Odessa just in time to meet the first Allied ship that had come through the Dardanelles and was in the Black Sea at Odessa. It was amazing. It was a British ship. I don't even remember the name of it. But we got right on it. There was no place else for us to stay and the Russians didn't seem to mind, they just let us go, uh in fact we had a Pole there who was trying to get out and I think he went with us. I know he did. Their checking of us at that time was very sporadic, and not too good.

I think most of the stuff that I've talked about has been ... pretty well covered to some of your questions. It took us from, well I figured the second week in January when we got away, and I arrived back in the states on the 10th of May, right around the time Roosevelt died. Actually we got over into Egypt about uh ..the first of April, so we were a couple of months on the way, and wandering around pretty much in Russia, avoiding, we were avoiding the Germans and we were avoiding the Russians to the best of our ability.

When we left Odessa on board that ship, of course the war was still going on now, it had not ended, officially. Everything was blacked out going through the Dardanelles, down through to the Mediterranean, and we went on over to Port Said Egypt, that was where the ship was going. We eh, we were left at Port Said by the ship. There was a detachment of American soldiers there so this was really the first time I came back under American control. And we stayed there almost a week. We had to wait 'til some kind of a ship came in that was going back where we wanted to go. And the next ship that came in was going to Naples Italy. And naturally we boarded it and we went back to Naples, Italy. And we stayed in Naples, I guess about a week and we were put on a ship then going to the United States, taking about 10 days.

We landed in Boston Harbor. Fort Miles Standish was sort of a processing point there for us, however they couldn't get us right out of there, so they let us go downtown and call them up every morning, and let them, er, let us know whether we were scheduled to leave or not, so that week we just spent there, we spent in a motel or a hotel. Called every morning to see if and when we were going, and just about a week it took to get us out of there.

It was eh...quite a trip. We were never recaptured. We were corralled by the Russians. We escaped from them in essence, at one point, but it was no sense in escaping from them, they were the ones that were trying to get us back, in a sense, and we were depending on them. All in all I'd say we travelled, from the time of our getting away about 600 miles.

The people that I were with, primarily Lts Spence and Secor. We still...Secor died about 10, maybe 10 or 15 years ago. Spence still makes our reunions which we have every year. We still get a kick out of each other, and we look back and try to think of exactly what happened in all this, in all this escapade. Forty-three years is a long way to look back and you try to remember the good things, and there were some good things. Gonna sign off for a few minutes now just in case...I'll leave this thing going, in case I think of anything else, ok.