

DW Memoirs

Interview with: SE; also present was his son, M; and wife, D
Interviewer: DW
Interview Date: ?
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[Begin CD 6.]

DW: You were liberated by the Czechs and taken back to American lines. At that point you were ninety pounds.

SE: I was ninety pounds.

DW: You were ninety pounds, and I originally heard that it was six months before you went home.

SE: No.

DW: It wasn't six months.

SE: No. In fact, I was hoping to get home for my birthday in June. The war was over in May.

But I never made it by June, but I got home sometime in July or August. I'll tell you why.

Maybe do it chronologically. I went home for a month, okay? And then I went to Lake Placid for two weeks to be reassigned.

DW: You went straight home?

SE: When I got off the boat—

DW: First I want to know exactly what happened, because I thought you had medical treatment in Europe.

SE: Only when I was in E___ they deloused me and they ran me through tests.

DW: What was it, delousing?

SE: They deloused you.

DW: And they sprayed you with DDT?

SE: You stand there naked, with your arms outstretched and your legs stretched, and they take the damn DDT and pump it into you. All this stuff's supposed to kill you? It's all over the place. And so that's the first thing then.

DW: And the lice start just falling out, dropping out of you?

SE: They die. They all die. Then after that, they gave me a shower and they gave me clean clothes, and they did run me through medical tests to see if I had tuberculosis, to see if I had any other problems, and actually—

DW: Did you have any GI [gastrointestinal] problems after that?

SE: No, I didn't. I did at that time. No. I'm trying to think. No, I didn't have any problems at all, because I ate like crazy

DW: You could eat anything you wanted?

SE: Anything.

DW: Was this at a hospital situation?

SE: It was more or less a hospital situation, yes, because it was a hospital situation.

DW: It was a hospital.

SE: You know this guy, J___B___, I told you [about]. Well, when I was working with him, he got his hand caught. We were coupling a pushcart, a push train—you know, these small carts.

And he got his hand caught in between two trains, and he mangled some fingers. I did see him in

E___, in a hospital robe, and I said to myself, *That son of a bitch is going to get a Purple Heart.*

[Laughter.] And so it was. It was actually a hospital. You didn't have nurses running around,

but you did have doctors and you did have to go through a series of tests. I think I was in E___

for about two weeks. Beautiful.

DW: Big ward?

SE: Yes, big ward. More like a barracks.

DW: Okay. You were there two weeks, just for rest basically?

SE: Well, basically to make sure that I didn't have any disease.

DW: Did they shoot you up with vitamins?

SE: No, they didn't have anything like that.

DW: You must have been so deficient.

SE: I was, but they fed me. They figured they'd bring it all back with food. I guess I came out of it a lot better than when I went into it because when I went into it, I was so sick that by the time I came out, I was better.

DW: They gave you a lot of fruit, vegetables?

SE: They gave you all you could eat of anything you wanted.

DW: Really.

SE: And everybody ate like crazy. And so I was there for two weeks, and then I was in northern France for about a month, and then I was home a month, and then when I went to Lake Placid, I remember it was September because it was the High Holidays. You know, Lake Placid was restricted, was a restricted club. We had Yom Kippur services—it was my greatest joy [chuckles]—in the Lake Placid Club. So it was September. So I must have got home in August, something like that.

DW: And in the north of France, you were a month?

SE: A month, a month, waiting for a boat, that's all, just waiting for a boat.

ME: What did you do?

SE: Nothing. We ate.

DW: You were staying at a barracks there?

SE: In tents.

DW: In tents? Back in tents??

SE: In tents, but big tents. You know, not like little pup tents where the water runs through. So we were in tents. It was a temporary camp. It was a holding camp, waiting for the boats. And we left from Le Havre. I landed in Le Havre, and I left from Le Havre. And I left Boston, and I came into Boston.

DW: Nice ship on the way back?

SE: Oh, yes. It was a hospital ship. The *Mariposa* was a hospital ship.

DW: What was the name of it?

SE: *Mariposa*....The accommodations were good. We slept in bunks, but they did have doctors on board, and I remember they had a wonderful library, and I read all the way back.

DW: Did they expect you to go to Japan?

SE: I was fearful that I was going to go to Korea, because by the time I got home, it was past August eighth, and the war was over in Europe, so by the time I got home, I knew I wasn't going to go anywheres.

DW: Oh, okay. We're in August, right.

SE: But then I had to sign up for Korea. Everybody did, okay? But the directive came out that no ex-prisoners or wounded would be drafted into the Army again, so I was exempt. Boy, I really that sweated that out. I *didn't* want to go back. I tell you, I was scared out of my life that they were going to take me back again.

DW: That was a nasty one.

ME: Coming out—you went in, a Jewish mother's boy.

SE: Yes.

ME: And you came home—

SE: I came home.

ME: —with this newfound manhood and confidence. What was it like going back to J___ and R___'s [his parents'] apartment?

DW: That's right. That's a good question.

SE: They never understood me.

DW: Really?

SE: Never.

DW: What do you mean, before or after, or after?

SE: Before, they understood me, but they never understood me after because I was angry, I was difficult, and was not the same son that they knew. I always felt their love, and I always felt that—you know. But I always felt that they never realized—they never knew me anymore.

ME: But J___—I always saw him as receptive, or was that a misread just of youth?

SE: J___, my father, loved me dearly, and I loved my father dearly. We had a very, very close bond. But that did not mean that we exchanged ideas freely or were on the same wavelength. We were not, anymore, ever, although he was a very loving guy, and I really loved my father. In fact, I went into a depression when he died.

ME: Yes. Was there any family member—was there anybody [after] you came back [whom you] sought out to try to reconcile what had happened and talk to?

SE: Not family. I'll tell you a story.

ME: Rabbi? Father?

SE: Nobody. Nobody. I had a best friend, M___T___.

DW: What was the name?

SE: M___T___. His father made Christmas-tree lights. That was the first job I ever had, was making Christmas-tree lights.

ME: Made a fortune in Christmas-tree lights.

SE: The time was coming.

DW: I love that.

ME: Is he T___ Fixtures?

SE: No, no.

ME: No?

SE: This was a T___ Company. It was a small company. But he sold out to the light company.

M___ was my best friend. And when I was captured, I said, *Wait until I see M___ and tell him what happened to me.* I took it for granted that he would...So I see him for the first time. He says, "Wait until I tell you what happened to me." He was captured!

DW: Oh, really?

SE: Yes.

DW: Was he also at the Bulge?

SE: No. But he never—it, like, rolled off his back. He never—

DE: Who, M___?

SE: M___. He never, in all the years that I know him, and we were so close, I knew everything he was thinking, and I [sic; he] knew everything that he [sic; I] was thinking, and we never, never talked about it. He would reach—although I think I was reading him. He did not—it wasn't that it bothered him; it didn't bother him. For some reason, he just walked right through it, the whole thing, and he was captured maybe a shorter period of time than I was, but he had no

visible effect on him at all. He was the same exact person when he went in as when he came out. He did things exactly the same. There was absolutely no change, no change in him from all this experience. And here I come through this thing with post-traumatic stress syndrome, with anxiety, with edema, with all kinds of mental and physical problems, and he just walked—it's like he walked on water, right through the whole thing. And I never could understand that. But we never discussed it. We never...

DW: Because of him?

SE: Because of him.

DW: You wanted to talk—

SE: [cross-talk; unintelligible]. “Eh, it happened then,” you know.

DE: [Laughs.] Did you tell them how different you were?

SE: Yes.

DW: We were just discussing.

ME: Mom, the women in Europe! God! [cross-talk; unintelligible].

SE: [Laughs.] . . .

SE: Yes.

DE: But he was a contemporary of your father, okay?

SE: My father, yes.

DE: So they were quite close, and R___ was a wonderful person.

SE: She was in Chautauqua in those days.

DE: In those days, she used to schlep from New York City all the way to Chautauqua for the courses and everything. But anyway, so meeting them and listening to stories about the sweet boy and how shy he was and how he would hide under the table when people would come into

the house, and he was so good, and then when they'd go to the country, he would be out with nature, you know, wandering around. Then, when we got engaged, I met his friends, the kindergarten group. They all came over to his folks' apartment, and they were talking—you know, reminiscing. And I sat there, and as far as I knew, they were talking about somebody I had never met. And I told Daddy—

DW: It was S___ they were talking about!

SE: I told Daddy—I said, “You were such a nebbish! I never would have married you. If you were the person that I have heard described by everybody, you would have been the last person in the world,” because to me, the strength that he had was one of the things that attracted me. He sure was [changed?]. [Laughs.] In your dreams. [Laughter.]

ME: But so you weren't ever really able to share with Grandpa your experience?

SE: Nothing.

DW: Did you ever talk to M___ about it? M___ was always 5,000 miles away from—

SE: I didn't talk to him. I didn't talk to any family.

ME: You and M___ would always have these long, deep discussions. What the hell were you talking about?

SE: I don't know. I liked M___.

ME: Yes.

DW: You did?

SE: Yes.

ME: Oh, very much so. They would go off in a room—

SE: Still do, still do.

ME: M___ would come to visit, and M___ would always sort of—until Dad came home, M___

would just sort of stand in the living room, looking out at the lake and thinking, and I'd always try to talk to him, and he tried like hell to talk to me, but, man, I just didn't have enough mind to talk to.

DW: Don't make it out to be "mind."

SE: He was [different?]. He really was.

ME: But he and Dad—you know, there are certain people that would visit Dad that Dad would talk to for a little while, and go over to someone else and talk to, and then go find Mom and talk to her. But when M___ would come, it seemed that Dad and M___ always got into—the only other comparison of somebody that Dad would engage for those lengths of time were—I would always try to sit on the periphery and listen—is S____. But he would just converse for a long time. I always wondered what they hell they talked about.

DW: What the hell did you talk about, besides [common?] cleaners?

SE: That was sixty years ago.

ME: It wasn't sixty years ago.

SE: Forty years ago.

DW: What did you talk about? Was there anything special?

SE: We just—we—you know. Sometimes—like, I felt with this guy, M___, sometimes your soul touches another person's soul. How it happens or why it happens—or maybe that's a bad way to explain it. I don't know, but something happens. A chemistry happens between two people, okay? Well, in the early years, I had that chemistry with M_____.

DW: I think he's lost it with everyone.

SE: He has.

DW: He's not in touch with any relative anymore.

SE: Well—

ME: You know, I'm bad about that. I can pick up with anybody, but—

DW: But you can. But you can.

ME: I can pick up with anybody, and it's like—

SE: Well, you and C____. You go on with C____.

ME: I know. There's a small group that I do. There's family that I care about, and I out-of-sight, out-of-mind them. But then I'll pick up with them, and it's like everything's—

SE: Oh, everybody does that.

ME: You know, which is [cross-talk; unintelligible].

SE: Everybody does that.

ME: But then I have other people that really make that strong, constant effort to maintain contact, and I'm not that kind of person.

DW: I don't think anybody who has a family and a job can—

ME: You can't do that. There are some people who are always writing with somebody; they keep in touch. Who can do it?

SE: There are ninety-nine people who don't and one person who does.

[End of interview.]