

Fifty-nine years ago, when Mr. Gabriel Serda entered the U.S. Army, WWII had not yet become a reality. Troops were being assembled and trained for the possibility of war. Mr. Serda was a mortar gunner for the 81st Armored Reconnaissance Division in Africa. His company was surrounded by the enemy. They were instructed to attempt to break thru enemy lines and rejoin friendly forces. After wandering through the desert for three days, he and 26 others were taken prisoners by the Germans. From that day on, he would be a POW for 2 years, 2 months, and 2 days. This period in his life is deeply ingrained in his memory.

Being a POW, Mr. Serda had to learn to survive and to escape, if at all possible. He would have to deal with his captors, the conditions that he was exposed to, and support for his fellow POW's and for himself.

From Africa where he was captured, they were flown to Italy and from there to different POW camps in Germany. At each camp, he was to assess the situation rapidly and learn to adjust to the harsh physical and mental demands that he would face. Routinely, they were served for breakfast a version of a cup of coffee and a piece of bread; for lunch, a bowl of soup that was mainly water and for supper another cup of coffee, a slice of bread with a piece of butter. Usually, everyone went to bed hungry. This, coupled with the daily work chores was a significant strain physically and mentally. Mr. Serda gives much recognition to the Red Cross organization. When they were finally allowed to intervene, the prisoners began to improve their physical status. Necessities, such as blankets and parcels of food were provided by the Red Cross. Mr. Serda recognized the need to keep himself continuously busy to overcome the mental stress that he and the others were facing. Mail was occasional but obviously a strong glimmer of hope for everyone. Escapes were ongoing but at that time, it was difficult for them to know what percentages were successful or not. Due to his civilian profession, he was assigned as one of many barbers for U.S. troops (POW's).

Each prisoner dealt with his captivity in his own way. Everyone was different in his attitude. Still each one of them realized the need to lend each other support for survival. Mr. Serda attributes, in part, the hard times he faced during the Depression as a positive experience that now came into play in helping him face his situation—survival under very difficult conditions.

To someone that has never faced such harsh realities, it is difficult to completely understand the day to day struggle that a POW faces. On April 21, 1945, his prison camp at Luckwalder, Germany, was liberated by the Russian Army. The German captors were removed. However, the entire camp remained under control of the Russian Army. There was a sense of relief in that an ally of the United States was now in control.

Today Mr. Serda remains extremely positive about what he had to confront in the service of his country. He strives to instill within his family, his friends, and his community the values of a free and democratic country. He will never forget the people with whom he lived as a POW. In his own words, "Thanks to Almighty God that I am still alive."

POW camps that Mr. Serda was incarcerated in:

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| 2-17-43 to 2-21-43 | Tunisia |
| 2-21-43 to 2-26-43 | Naples |
| 4-2-43 to 4-23-43 | Munich IIIA |
| 4-25-43 to 7-18-43 | Fosterburg IIIB |
| 7-19-43 to 1-25-44 | Site Camp IIIB |
| 1-30-44 to 2-21-45 | Frankenstein IIIB |
| 2-22-44 to 2-21-45 | Oflag 64 (Poland) |
| 3-9-45 to 4-21-45 | Luckwalder Germany (Liberated) |