

Emma Thigpen

(318) 655 6489

Highschool Junior

Deborah Morehead

Caddo Magnet Parish High School

Seventy-Three Years

It is impossible to imagine what Nick Hope may have been feeling the morning of his reunion with his liberator as newspaper reporters clustered around him to capture a moment seventy-three years in the making. This reunion came to be because of a chance meeting between two men a year earlier at the Dachau Holocaust memorial. Both men are tied to the place in different ways. One is the son of a survivor of the Holocaust; the other, the son of a liberator. As the two men got to talking, they realized this connection and knew their fathers had to meet.

Henry Stuehmeyer grew up in a poverty-stricken orphanage with his six siblings. He wanted a better future for himself. Eventually, he ran away from the orphanage with thoughts of a “better life” motivating him (“Petaluma Meeting Unites Liberator and Dachau Survivor”). Like many hopeful young men of his time, he chose to join the military; before his eighteenth birthday, he earned a gold star for his courage and had served in France, Austria, and Germany.

At around the same age, Nick Hope was wasting away in Dachau, where he had been since 1943. He weighed a mere eighty pounds and was slowly starving. But even then, he says he still had “hope in his heart” that Dachau wouldn’t be the place his life ended (“Concentration Camp Survivor meets Liberator 73 Years Later”).

At Dachau over thirty-thousand Jewish people died in under a decade (“Dachau”). Dachau was Hitler’s first concentration camp, and as the war raged on it gradually became more and more unbearably cruel. Originally it was intended to hold political prisoners, but in the end, it imprisoned innocent Jewish, disabled, and homosexual people. Many people faced starvation and brutal punishing work. Dachau was finally liberated on April 29,1945, by American soldiers

(“Dachau”). When remembering what he saw when he helped to liberate Dachau, Henry Stuehmeyer says it was “devastating” and that he “couldn’t go through that again” (CITE). Nick Hope doesn’t talk about his time here very often. He says it’s too horrible and that he doesn’t want his family burdened by the horrors of that period.

Once he was free from the chains of Dachau, Nick Hope did everything he could to put his life back together. He entered a clinic to regain his health, and after two years he was ready to move on. He then moved to America and started a family. When he first moved, he changed his last name to Hope because it was part of the pronunciation of his Russian surname and he thought it was fitting for his new life. He started a career as a builder and has built ninety-five houses in Petaluma, California where he has lived for several years. He married in 1951 and now has many grandchildren to dote on. He says Stuehmeyer “saved his life” (“He saved my life”).

Stuehmeyer went onto serve in three branches of the military (“Petaluma Meeting Unites Liberator and Dachau Survivor”). When in the Air Force, he did three deployments in Vietnam. He then retired in California where he did extra work for the Navy on his downtime.

Now seventy-three years later, two courageous men were united again to pay homage to the painful part of their past that has forever intertwined their stories.

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