

Found in Cal's papers was this story on his visit to Dachau in May of 1945.

TWO SUNDAYS

By

CARROLL W. STEWART

United States Army Air Corps

Germany, May 1945



The stately Corinthian columns of a Renaissance porch stretch skyward in the debris-choked center of Germany's fourth city, Munich. Here, greats of the past have appeared to bring tidings to the people of the Bavarian capital. Today these columns are finely balanced, ready to topple into the twisted still-smoldering ruin that was once one of the proudest and most beautiful cities of Europe. Scrawled in white-wash across the base of the imposing edifice are these words:

“Dachau – Velden – Buchenwald
Ich schame mich, dass ich ein Deutscher bin!
—P. Hoffl.”

Translated into English, meaning:
“Because of Dachau, Velden and Buchenwalds,
I am ashamed that I am German: —P. Hoffl”.

Whether Hoffl was a peer or a pauper, I cannot say, and of the circumstances that induced his confession, I do not know.

I decided to go to Dachau, only twelve miles outside Munich, and see for myself the concentration camp that has become infamous in every tongue.

It was a broiling Maytime Sunday noon when I reached the town of Dachau that rises on the rolling Danube plains north of the Bavarian Alps. The only activity there was American – the Military Government administering to a bewildered populace, and the GIs of an Infantry company carrying out their routine occupational duties.

On the outskirts of the town a stork was surveying the bright countryside from a nest atop a squat schoolhouse tower. Otherwise, all was serene, and Dachau differed not at all from the other towns and villages of Bavaria.

A mile southwest of town I turned down a lane that paralleled a railroad track and led towards a copse. At the edge of the copse was a rambling wall in front of which stood a row of respectable-looking red brick houses, standing in the sun like regimented soldiers. This, I later learned, was the center compound of the camp where the SS officers resided.

A fatigue-clad corporal at the edge of the gate politely asked me to roll up my sleeve, whereupon he injected a GI typhus shot. He then sprayed DDT (a powerful insecticide powder) into my clothes. With these preliminaries over and my papers in order, I was ready to enter the camp itself.

The camp was actually divided into four separate compounds. The second compound consisted of a series of low, grimly camouflaged buildings in which the SS administrated certain phases of their world headquarters. The third compound contained storage buildings, railroad siding, gas chamber and crematorium. The fourth or inner compound, enclosed by a high electrically-charged barbed-wire fence and a moat, was the prison pen where the inmates – thousands of them – wandered aimlessly in thin, disheveled clothing that bore blue-and-white striped markings.

Entrance into the inner compound was made by crossing a bridge and passing through a massive steel gate. No prisoner had ever forced his way beyond this barrier, and if he had he would have been mowed down by machinegun fire from the stilt-legged sentry boxes.

Uncounted political prisoners and slave laborers from the far corners of Europe had filed through this gate with cold Nazi steel pressed in the hollow of their backs. Many of them read, but few believed, the cynical words: “Arbeit Macht Frei” (Work Leads to Freedom) in the grillwork of the gate.

Largely Russians, Poles, French and Jews, these prisoners were brought to Dachau as a part of a vast economic scheme of slave labor. There was a variety of work for the prisoners in the camp itself, though much of the labor was “farmed out.” Arbeit was the keynote; torture, starvation, disease and death were the rewards.

The inner compound, in area roughly equivalent to four city blocks, resembled a Western cattle corral. The ground was barren and hot where bare feet and wooden and tattered shoes shuffled. A tailing-like coat of sand covered everything. The frame buildings were elongated single-story affairs with gently sloping roofs.

The Nazis had been driven from Dachau only a few days before. In the meantime, the camp broke out in a rash of flags of all sizes and colors. By far the most prominent were the flags of the United States, Russia and Poland. Infrequently, the Stars and Stripes lacked the required number of stars, but it flapped gaily in the breeze, anyway. A huge Red flag, hidden during the reign of terror, radiated almost as much heat as the Bavarian sun.

I noted a white block-letter sign on the side of a building. It read in German:

“There is a road to freedom.

its milestones are:

obedience,

patience,

Efficiency

industry.”

My guide was a fragile Polish man, thirty-five-years old. He was a Roman Catholic theological student in Warsaw until he was condemned to Dachau five years ago for “being an enemy to the Nazi Party”. His lips were anemic, his face colorless, and his head had been shorn by American medics for sanitary reasons. He was anxious to be a guide even though he was pathetically ill, both mentally and physically. With him showing the way, I saw virtually all of Dachau. That is, all except that which had been cleaned up. The sickening stench that persisted was sufficient evidence for that which I did not actually see.

There were barracks of human guinea pigs and cages of white mice that had been dedicated to German medical scientists. There were extensive rose gardens, tended by prisoners, that also fitted into Dachau’s scientific “contribution”. There were pens of white rabbits whose fur went into the lining of the flying clothes for the Luftwaffe. Great pains had been taken by the Nazis to keep accurate case histories on the rabbits and the mice, while human flesh was cheaper than the dirt underfoot.

Nearly one thousand people were housed in a barracks the size of which the United States Army would billet about thirty-five men. In these buildings, the spindly skeletons of human beings sometimes slept four to a bunk. The bunks, about eighteen inches in depth were built from the floor to the ceiling like shelves.

Like many other inmates, the student priest had learned considerable English during his imprisonment. He told how small cliques studied in muted whispers at work and in their bunks. The reason, he said, was that they felt that one day the English-speaking people would be their liberators.

The happiest moment in Dachau, the guide recounted, was the sight of the Allied air armadas, which sent a current of hope surging through their frail bodies.

The inmates of Dachau were not altogether without knowledge of the outside world. The death-rate was so high that quantities of incoming prisoners were received daily. The new arrivals often shared the news which had been heard on the forbidden Allied radio, an offense which sometimes resulted in the imprisonment.

The student priest explained that he had outlived many of the other prisoners only by God's grace. Pastor Martin Niemoller had also been an inmate at Dachau.

This was a city of living dead. A place where grotesque skeletons moved and breathed and sometimes made noises. Some of the emaciated bodies there were strong enough to register signs of happiness. They were fortunate. The sight and smell was sickening and the emotional strain for me, a mere visitor, was very nearly more than I could stand. Hundreds were still dying of disease, diarrhea and starvation. How many thousands had died from the Nazi barbarism will probably never be known.

Amid all this I saw a handful of United States Army nurses and medics working feverishly giving to Dachau everything that medical skill could give. The demobilization plan and point system must have been something far removed from the minds of these girls. They were counting bodies, not points!

My guide pointed out Block Number Five. Outwardly, it was no different from the others. I will not recount the horrible legend of Block Number Five where every kind of torture was imposed. Our Sunday magazine sections have in the past bared stories of Nazi bestiality but they have probably underestimated in comparison with the grim goings-on in Block Number Five.

I saw the gas chamber and crematorium, linked together by a short hallway. They were situated near the railroad building. My guide explained how most of the executions that took place in the chamber involved prisoners who were brought in from other sources. Upon de-training, they were told to undress and "enter the shower room for admission baths". When the room was filled the doors were closed. Instead of water being poured on them, the gas jets were opened. The bodies that slumped into a heap on the floor were hauled outside where they were piled like cordwood against the side of the building. The capacity of the three-oven incinerator had been inadequate!

As a boy I used to visit the Sioux City and Omaha stockyards with my father. Slaughter there was a refined art compared with Nazi methods.

Across the street from Block Number Five was a new altar erected between two trees, the only trees inside the corral. People were praying there. The candles on the altar had been burning since April 29, 1945. That was the date Dachau was liberated. About 4:30 P.M. the prisoners heard gunfire and the rumble of mechanized equipment. The SS went berserk with madness. In their frenzy they "tortured" themselves with blunt instruments to veil their identity. They shed SS uniforms and climbed into prisoners' clothing.

At 5 P.M. Seventh Army doughboys began swarming over the wall and through the gate. Many of the SS at Dachau met a more dramatic fate that afternoon than Hitler or Himmler. The liberators of Dachau pressed right on in close pursuit of fleeing SS and Wehrmact.

A bitterly ironic incident took place upon taking leave of the camp. My guide handed me a picture postcard entitled "Rosen aus Dachau" (Roses of Dachau).

The Stars and Stripes stated recently that "a Congressional mission reported to Washington that its inspection of German concentration camps forced the conclusion that the Nazis carried out a 'calculated and diabolical program of planned torture'".

I wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to press the Queen Elizabeth into a trans-Atlantic shuttle service so that thousands of American teachers, politicians, writers and Washington "brass" might come to Dachau. The Russians, Jews, Poles, Czechs, French and lots of others, don't need the evidence of Dachau. They know. The British believe what these other peoples have learned. But what about the Americans? I'm afraid they'll be inclined to disbelieve or forget unless they see for themselves, for it is only natural for a people whose basic attitude towards human nature is that it is benevolent to look upon horror stories as sensationalism and exaggeration.

Dachau would be an effective object lesson for the so-called good Germans, too. In fact, many citizens from the towns near concentration camps have already been forced by our army to view these instances of bestiality.

The following Sunday afternoon I was in the university city of Heidelberg strolling sown the Hauptstrasse. I dropped in at the American Red Cross service club (the Heidelberg museum, now transformed into a recreation center for both officers and enlisted men) where the Heidelberg Symphony Orchestra was playing a concert of Hayden, Grieg and Bach. I seated myself to listen, but I was very inattentive. Glancing about the audience I saw uniforms representing all the branches and ranks of our Army. I saw on the faces of these men the indelible imprint of a terrible war that had just ended, and underneath I read of the romance of America. It made me exceedingly

proud to be in a United States Army uniform – to me the most precious single item in the Old World today.

Even as the orchestra played Bach's Fugue in D Minor my mind continued to stray and I mused on many things. I remembered that the people of this beautiful old Schloss town, one of few German cities not outwardly disfigured by the war, share with the rest of Germany the Nazi-propagated belief that "American music is cheap and vulgar". Yet, here the Heidelberg Symphony was performing exclusively for Americans. If not for us, not at all! I noticed a corporal in the third row who was following every note on the conductor's musical score. It was easy enough to see that those in this audience were patrons all in the art of music.

As the strings of the orchestra took up the ascending scale in the Fugue finale, my mind flashed back one week to that unholy Sunday at Dachau. I would never forget the minutest detail of the city of living dead . . . the gas chamber . . . Block Number Five. I could almost smell the sickening stench of those decadent bodies piled high like cordwood!

Then I thought of Herr Hoffl's words in white-wash on the Renaissance porch in Munich. It occurred to me that Hoffl had struck upon an appropriate slogan for his countrymen, who, after all, were the accomplices in the crime, when he wrote:

“. . . I am ashamed that I am a German!" —The End

— *Cal Stewart was a gifted writer.*