

## DACHAU: EXPERIMENTAL MURDER

By Martha Gellhorn

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM PACHNER  
RADIOED FROM PARIS



"Nothing was so insanely wicked as these starved, outraged, naked, nameless dead. Behind one pile of dead lay the clothed healthy bodies of the German guards"

**W**E CAME out of Germany in a C-47 carrying American prisoners of war. The planes were lined up on the grass field at Regensburg, and the passengers waited sitting in the shade under the wings. They would not leave the planes: this was a trip no one was going to miss. When the crew chief said "All aboard," we got in as if we were escaping from a fire.

No one looked out the windows as we flew over Germany. No one ever wanted to see Germany again. They turned away from it with hatred and sickness; everything about it was evil. At first they did not talk but when it became real that Germany was behind forever they began talking of their prisons. We did not comment on the Germans: they are past words.

"No one will believe us," a soldier said.

They agreed on that: No one would believe them.

"Where were you captured, miss?" a soldier asked.

"I am only bumming a ride; I've been down to see Dachau."

One of the men said suddenly, "We got to talk about it, see? We got to talk about it if anyone believes us or not." . . .

Behind the barbed wire and the electric fence, the skeletons sat in the sun and searched themselves for lice. They have no age and no faces; they all look alike and like nothing you will ever see if you are lucky. We crossed the wide, crowded, dusty compound between the prison barracks and went to the hospital. In the hall sat more of the skeletons and from them came the smell of disease and death. They watched us but did not move: No expression shows on a face that is only yellowish stubbly skin stretched across bone.

What had been a man dragged himself into the doctor's office; he was a Pole and he was about six feet tall and he weighed less than a hundred pounds and he wore a striped prison shirt, a pair of unlaced boots and a



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blanket which he tried to hold around his legs. His eyes were large and strange and stood out from his face, and his jawbone seemed to be cutting through his skin. He had come to Dachau from Buchenwald on the last death transport.

*The Germans wanted to discover how little oxygen a man needed to live. Eight hundred died in that experiment. Their death was quick for Dachau; it took only 15 minutes, but it was a hard death.*

There were fifty boxcars of his dead traveling companions still on the siding outside the camp, and for the last three days the American Army had forced Dachau civilians to bury these dead.

When this transport arrived, the German guards locked the men, women and children in the cars and there they slowly died of hunger and thirst. They screamed and they tried to fight their way out; from time to time the guards fired into the cars to stop the noise.

This man had survived; he was found in a pile of dead. Now he stood on the bones that were his legs and talked, and then suddenly he wept. "Everyone is dead," he said, and the face that was not a face twisted with pain or sorrow or horror. "No one is left. Everyone is dead. I cannot help myself," he said. "Here I am and I am finished and cannot help myself. Everyone is dead."

The Polish doctor who had been a prisoner here for five years said, "In four weeks you will be a young man again. You will be fine."

Perhaps his body will live and take strength but one cannot believe that his eyes will ever be like other people's eyes.

The doctor spoke with great detachment about the things he had watched in this hospital. He had watched them, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. All the prisoners talked in the same way—quietly with a strange little smile as if they apologized for talking of such loathsome things to someone who lived in a real world and could hardly be expected to understand Dachau.

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"The Germans made here some unusual experiments," he said. "They wished to see how long an aviator could go without oxygen; how high in the sky he could go. So they had a closed car from which they pumped the oxygen. It is a quick death," he said. "It does not take more than fifteen minutes. But it is a hard death. They killed not so many people, only eight hundred, in that experiment. It was found that no one can live above 36,000 feet altitude without oxygen."

"Whom did they choose for this experiment?" I asked.

"Any prisoner," he said, "so long as he was healthy. They picked the strongest. The mortality was one hundred per cent, of course."

"It is very interesting, is it not?" said another doctor. We did not look at one another. I do not know how to explain it, but aside from the terrible anger you feel, you are ashamed. You are ashamed for mankind.

"The Experiment of the Water"

OldMagazineArticles.com



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"There was also the experiment of the water," said the first doctor. "This was to see how long pilots could survive when they were shot down over water like the Channel, let us say. For that, the German doctors put the prisoners in great vats of sea water, and they stood in water up to their necks. It was found that the human body can resist for two hours and a half in water eight degrees below zero. They killed six hundred people on this experiment. Though sometimes a man had to suffer three times, for he fainted early in the experiment and then he was revived, and a few days later the experiment was again undertaken."

"Didn't they scream? Didn't they cry out?" I said.

He smiled at that question. "There was no use in this place for a man to scream or cry out. It was no use for any man ever."

A colleague of the doctor's came in. He was the one who knew about the malaria experiment. The German doctor who was chief of the army tropical medicine research used Dachau as an experimental station. He was attempting to find a way to immunize German soldiers against malaria. To that end, he inoculated 11,000 Dachau prisoners with tertiary malaria. The death rate from the malaria was not too heavy; it simply meant that these prisoners weakened by fever died more quickly afterward from hunger. However, in one day three men died of overdoses of pyramidon with which, for some unknown reason, the Germans were then experimenting. No immunization for malaria was ever found.

Down the hall in the surgery, the Polish surgeon got out the record book to look up some data on operations performed by the SS doctors. These were castration and sterilization operations. The prisoner was forced to sign a paper beforehand saying that he willingly undertook this self-destruction. Jews and gypsies were castrated; any foreigner who had had relations with a German woman was sterilized. The woman was sent to a concentration camp.

The surgeon mentioned another experiment, really a very bad one, he said, and obviously quite useless. The guinea pigs were Polish priests. (Over two thousand Catholic priests passed through Dachau, but only one thousand are alive.) The German doctors injected streptococcus germs in the upper leg of the prisoners between the muscle and the bone. An extensive abscess formed, accompanied by fever and extreme pain.

The Polish doctor knew of more than a hundred cases who had been treated this way; there may have been more. He had a record of thirty-one deaths, but it took usually from two to three months of ceaseless pain before the patient died, and all of them died after several operations performed during the last few days of their lives. The operations were a further experiment to see if a dying man could be saved, but the answer was that he could not. Some prisoners recovered entirely because they were treated with the already known and proved antidote, but there were others who were now moving around the camp as best they could, crippled for life.



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And then because very simply I could listen to no more, my guide who had been in Dachau for ten and a half years took me across the compound to the jail. In Dachau if you want to rest from one horror you go and see another.

The jail was a long clean building with small white cells in it. Here lived the people whom the prisoners called the N.N. men. N.N. stands for *nacht und nebel*, which means "night and mist." Translated into less romantic terms, this means that the prisoners in these cells never saw a human being; were never allowed to speak to anyone; were never taken out into the sun and the air. They lived in solitary confinement on the watery soup and a slice of bread which was the camp diet.

There was, of course, the danger of going mad. But no one ever knew what happened to them in the years of their silence. And on Friday before the Sunday when the Americans entered Dachau, eight thousand men were removed by the SS on a final death transport. Amongst these were all the prisoners from the solitary cells. None of these men have been heard of since.

In Dachau if a man was found with a cigarette butt in his pocket he received twenty-five to fifty lashes with a bull whip. If he failed to stand at attention with his hat off six feet away from any SS trooper who happened to pass, he had his hands tied behind his back and he was hung by his bound hands from a hook on the wall for an hour. If he did any other little thing which displeased the jailers he was put in the box. "The box" is a room the size of a telephone booth. It is so constructed that being in it alone, a man cannot sit down nor kneel down nor, of course, lie down. It was usual to put four men in it together. Here they stood for three days and nights without food or water or any form of sanitation. Afterward they went back to the sixteen-hour day of labor and the diet of watery soup and a slice of bread like soft gray cement.

It is not known how many people died in this camp in the twelve years of its existence but at least 45,000 are known to have died in the last three years. And last February and March, 2,000 were killed in the gas chamber because, though they were too weak to work, they did not have the grace to die, so it was arranged for them.

The gas chamber is part of the crematorium. The crematorium is a brick building outside the camp compound standing in a grove of pine trees. A Polish priest had attached himself to us and, as we walked there, he said, "I started to die twice of starvation but I was very lucky. I got a job as a mason when we were building this crematorium, so I received a little more food and that way I did not die."

I said I had not, and my guide said I could not; it was within the zone where the 2,000 typhus cases were more or less isolated.

"It is a pity," the priest said. "We finally got a chapel and we had Holy Mass there almost every Sunday. There are very beautiful murals. The man who painted them died of hunger two months ago."



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Now we were at the crematorium, and there suddenly but never to be believed were the bodies of the dead. They were everywhere. There were piles of them inside the oven room, outside the door and alongside the building. They were all naked and behind the crematorium the ragged clothing of the dead was neatly stacked—shirts, jackets, trousers and shoes awaiting sterilization and further use. The clothing was handled with order but the bodies were dumped like garbage rotting in the sun.

### **Small Justice for the Slain**

We have all seen the dead like bundles lying on all the roads of half the earth, but nowhere was there anything like this. Nothing about war was ever as insanely wicked as these starved and outraged naked, nameless dead. Behind one pile of dead lay the clothed healthy bodies of the German guards who had been found in this camp. They were killed at once by the prisoners when the American Army entered. And for the first time anywhere, one could look at a dead man with gladness.

Just behind the crematorium stood the hothouses and they were fine big modern hothouses. Here the prisoners grew the flowers that the SS officers loved. Next to the hothouses were the vegetable gardens and very rich ones, too, where the starving prisoners cultivated the vitamin foods that kept the SS strong. But if a man dying of hunger furtively pulled up and gorged himself on a head of lettuce he would be beaten until he was unconscious. And in front of the crematorium separated from it by a stretch of garden stood a long row of well-built commodious homes. The families of the SS officers lived here: their wives and children lived here quite happily while the chimneys of the crematorium spewed out the unending human ashes.

The American soldier in the plane said, "We got to talk about it."

You cannot talk about it very well, because there is a kind of shock that sets in and makes it almost unbearable to go back and remember what you have seen.

I have not talked about the women who were moved to Dachau three weeks ago from their own concentration camps. Their crime was that they were Jews. There was the lovely girl from Budapest who somehow was still lovely, and the woman with mad eyes who had watched her sister walk into the gas chamber at Auschwitz and been held back, and the Austrian woman who pointed out quite calmly that they all had the dresses they wore on their backs, that they had never had anything more, and that they worked sixteen hours a day, too, in the long winters and that they, too, were "corrected," as the Germans say, for any offense, real or imaginary.

I have not talked about how it was the day the American Army arrived, though the prisoners told me. In their joy to be free and longing to see the friends who had come at last, the prisoners rushed to the fence and died—electrocuted. There were those who died cheering, because that effort of happiness was more than their bodies could en-



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dure. There were those who died because at last they had food and they ate before they could be stopped and it killed them. I do not know words fine enough to talk of the men who have lived in this horror for years—three years, five years, ten years—and whose minds are as clear and unafraid as the day they entered.

I was in Dachau when the German armies surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. It was a suitable place to be. For surely this war was made to abolish Dachau and all the other places like Dachau and everything that Dachau stands for. To abolish it forever. That these cemetery prisons existed is the crime and shame of the German people.

We are not entirely guiltless, we the Allies, because it took us twelve years to open the gates of Dachau. We were blind and unbelieving and slow, and that we can never be again. We must know now that there can never be peace if there is cruelty like this in the world.

And if ever again we tolerate such cruelty we have no right to peace.



*Martha Gellhorn, War Correspondent  
(image added)*