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Nordhausen: A Hell Factory Worked by the Living Dead

Al Newman, NEWSWEEK war correspondent with the American First Army, sends the following account of what the Americans found at Nordhausen in Central Germany.

I was with the combat command of the Third Armored Division when, in conjunction with a regiment of the 104th, it took Nordhausen. After the fight was over, a medical major reported an urgent situation in the barracks in the outskirts of the town and asked the general of the command to come immediately. The general came.

No one who saw the charnel house of Nordhausen ever will be able to forget the details of that horrible scene. As you approached the badly bombed barracks you could hear low moans and pitiful cries, and the incredible stench from the place increased step by step. Here 200 slave-worker prisoners had been placed alongside a railway where the American Air Forces could bomb them, and thus complete the cold, scientific job of slow starvation the SS had been doing.

These Were Men: Many were killed in the raid of April 4, and at this point the SS let the dead lie beside the living—or rather the dying—in piles on filthy straw fouled by their own excrement. Only a handful could stand on rickety, pipestem legs. Those who had clothes were dressed in prison stripes. Their eyes were sunk deeply into their skulls and their skins under thick dirt were a ghastly yellow. Some sobbed great dry sobs to see the Americans. Others merely wailed pitifully, and one poor semiconscious Jew who kept crying “Ey yaah” will haunt my dreams for many years.

In one corner was a pile of arms and legs.

The Yanks stood there stunned and silent. Then a soldier behind me said: “We ought to get every kraut in town and march ’em through here.”

The general was wild with good old-fashioned American anger. He said to get the live ones out of there pronto, kick some krautheads out of their houses, get him ambulances and medics and make up some nourishing broth. The major, also blowing his top, dashed out to an undamaged block of modern flats. “Any civilian not evacuated in fifteen minutes will be shot,” he roared. There was no back talk.

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Nordhausen

In half an hour ambulances were on hand and within the hour the creatures—you could not by any stretch of the imagination call them human beings—were in clean beds and under medical treatment. Nevertheless, three died of starvation the first night.

While these miserable wrecks were being salvaged, a task force knifing out of the town to the north was taking the Nazi hell factory where the slaves had worked for their torturers. Our intelligence had pinpointed this underground plant as the most important objective in these parts. It made V weapons.

Where the V-Bombs Grew: At dusk the task force reported the mission completed and brought back a man with a tale from the Arabian Nights. He was named Eddie, French-born, but a Massachusetts Yankee by upbringing and accent.

He was one of the half-starved slaves in the death camp at the hell factory. A civilian resident of Paris since 1931, he had been sentenced to death for attempting to aid three American fliers to escape. For some reason the SS decided to kill him the slow way instead of shooting him. Despite this he was in better physical shape than any of his fellow slaves and his mind was still keen.

“The factory made V-1s and V-2s,” he said. “There were 22,000 workers there. For three months prior to last May I never got above the ground, nor did any of us, for there were no barracks. The SS beat us with thick electric cables and pick handles. Once they hanged 30 Poles and Russians before our eyes for alleged sabotage. There was no sabotage, but it was an effective warning. Our straw bosses were German criminals, and they certainly gave us hell.

“In addition to prisoners, some German and foreign women worked in the factory. They worked on a voluntary basis and the attitude of the SS toward them was extremely correct. They had their own prostitutes who were kept in their camp.

“Five tunnels lead into the factory. Railroad trains ran right into the mountain. The V weapons were loaded on flat-cars and camouflaged before they were run out. Warheads were attached and rockets fully assembled.”