



KL Dachau camp after liberation (AIPN)

ARTYKUŁ

Dachau and death were synonymous

Author: **Anna Jagodzińska, Tomasz Ceran**

01.12.2019

Col. William Quinn from the 7th US Army after partaking in the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in May of 1945, wrote this in his report: „There, our troops found sights, sounds and stench beyond belief, cruelties so enormous as to be incomprehensible to the normal mind. Dachau and death were synonymous.”

By the order of Heinrich Himmler from March 22nd, 1933 the first concentration camp was established in the Bavaria region in Germany. Founding of the camp, and later of other camps as well, was based on the

February 28th, 1933 emergency decree concerning “protection of the nation and the country”. The Dachau camp was built on a swampy area, characteristic for its unhealthy, moist climate, especially unpleasant during autumn and winter, when the prisoners were forced to stand outside for hours, at the camp’s barrack square. It was a death camp, where prisoners were being killed with exhausting work, hunger, physical abuse and pseudo-medical tests. After walking through the camp’s gate under the sign “Arbeit macht frei” (“Work sets you free”, trans. annotation), prisoners became nameless numbers, stripped of any rights and left with seemingly one “way out” – through the chimney of the crematorium.

Around 250 thousand prisoners went through the KL Dachau; on the liberation day there were barely 33 thousand of them, almost half of whom were Poles (it was the largest ethnic group). In December of 1940, priests from Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen-Gusen and Oranienburg were also brought to the camp. There were 2720 Catholic priests in total (Polish clergymen the most – 1780) held in Dachau, 868 of them perished. The precise number of prisoners and mortal victims is difficult to measure, since the camp’s index was lacking entries for people who were brought to the camp by the Gestapo for execution. The prisoners were being slaughtered almost until the very day of the liberation. In March of 1945, 70 women from the French Resistance were hanged, on March 5th 4 English and 3 American pilots, shot down during airstrikes, were killed as well.

Even for veterans, who already experienced the cruelty of war, the shock was so great that they called KL Dachau “one of the scariest symbols of barbarism”.

The camp’s overcrowding hit its peak in 1944, when thousands of people were transferred from the already evacuated concentration camps, e.g. Auschwitz or Buchenwald. Prisoners who didn’t die on the way, were in the state of total exhaustion. Most of them slept outside. Many didn’t receive food nor water. Barracks, built for 45 people, were occupied by 150-200 prisoners; one bloc would often be a home to a thousand inmates. Small, one-person beds were occupied by two people at once, the healthy side by side with the ill. Overcrowding brought higher mortality rate, people usually died of typhoid, putrid fever and starvation. The ill were often too weak to even leave their bunks. They lay naked, without underwear nor any bed sheets. People were dying in hundreds. Countless bodies were stacked in front of the crematorium. Some prisoners, barely showing any signs of life, lay in mud in front of the blocs, dirty and unshaved.

On April 14th, 1945 Heinrich Himmler gave the order to eradicate the Buchenwald and KL Dachau camps: Kein

Häftling darf lebendig in die Hände des Feindes kommen (no prisoner can be given alive to the enemy)/ In Dachau, the prisoners were supposed to be all slaughtered and the camp itself be burned down on April 29th 1945, at 9 pm. This was discovered by the International Prisoner Committee, which had in its ranks e.g. a former rector of the Warsaw University of Technology, prof. Kazimierz Drewnowski.



**KL Dachau camp after liberation
(AIPN)**

You are almost free...

In the last days of April, chaos broke out in the camp. Prisoner commandos assigned to work outside the camp grounds, stopped leaving. The first evacuation was ordered on the 26th of April. All prisoners got called to the camp square with their personal belongings and blankets, yet the operation was cancelled after a few hours. Similar situation occurred in the next few days. The Germans raised a white flag. Members of the Swiss Red Cross came with food packages. These actions were taken to make the prisoners believe, that they were under no threat. The commanders of the camp left, leaving behind 400, well-armed soldiers of the SS (the whole SS crew consisted of around 4 thousand people).

This is how prof. Drewnowski remembered these last events:

“I’m to head to the chancellery with all my belongings. The same for Leon K. and Zdzisław W. We are taken by [Gustaw] Baumann, a limped, German Communist on a bike, supposedly one of the trusted officers. We’re going in the middle of the night, without an escort. In the plantation’s canteen we’re greeted by Vogt [plantation’s supervisor] and all members of his administration. The tables were covered with food and drinks. He says: you’re almost free. We’re sitting there, eating, the German women serving us... what a

change.”

The US army reached Munich on April 25th, the prisoners heard the allied bombers attacking the city. The Prisoner Committee sent Karl Reimer – one of the inmates – to inform the Americans about Himmler’s order. This information reached the commander of the 45th US Infantry Division, general Robert Tryon Frederick, stationed in Pfaffenhoffen, on the night of 28th and 29th of April. Frederick sent a dozen soldier scout patrol towards Dachau, which stumbled upon 40 train wagons near the camp, filled with several thousand bodies of starved or murdered prisoners.

This transport was described by a Polish prisoner, priest Franciszek Cegiełka (inmate number 28048):

“On Sunday afternoon, on April 29th, 1945 I got ordered to transport the dead from the train which came to Dachau Saturday evening, April 28th. It came from the Kaufering camp, situated 50 km from Dachau. A couple thousand prisoners came in two trains, 926 of them were still alive. They were mostly Jews. All of them in the state of complete exhaustion. They got dressed in the camp and were assigned to one of the blocs, after taking a shower. In the meantime, the dead bodies from Kaufering stayed on the train, and it were these bodies that I was supposed to transport to the crematorium on Sunday afternoon, via the so-called slave express [that is how the prisoners called those, who served as the platform with the dead to the crematorium] [...]. After a few minutes of walking we got to the cargo train. The sight was indescribable. Train cars were filled with corpses. We felt powerless. Nonetheless; we needed to save those, who still showed signs of life. After a long search, we found 16 alive. Despite the order of an officer of the SS, we did not go for more corpses.”

The American soldiers, shocked with their discovery, went along the train tracks and reached KL Dachau at 5:25 pm. The first soldier to walk through the camp’s gate was an American of Polish origin, a son of Polish immigrants who came to the US before the First World War. A few minutes later, allied Jeeps drove to the camp. Suddenly, shots were fired at the American soldiers. They quickly returned fire and killed the guards at the towers.

Not all the Germans managed to escape. Surprised with the sudden appearance of the Americans, they dressed up as inmates and hid inside the German blocs. The US soldiers, aided by the actual prisoners, searched for them inside the buildings, and managed to find all of them in the end. One of them, was Franz Boettger, who was responsible for the prisoners’ records and fulfilling orders of the camp’s commander, often regarding punishments for prisoners. He was also in charge of keeping order in the camp, controlling prisoners and designating work teams inside the camp. Boettger, a butcher, was the one who decided who

got to live and who had to die. In December, 1945 the US court-martial sentenced him to death. He was hanged from the very same gallows, which he used to hang prisoners from himself.

A Salesian, priest Jan Woś (prisoner number 22222) wrote this on May 3rd:

“In the afternoon we went to the camp square. They captured raportfuhrer Franz Boettger, an executioner, who was shooting people as recently as a week ago. He was recognised by prisoners who were responsible for rabbit breeding, the so-called “rabbiters commando”. He stood at the Jourhaus tower in haeftling [prisoner’s; trans. annotation] clothes. They ordered him to shout <Heil Hitler>. We knew, that he singlehandedly murdered thousands of prisoners, shooting them in the back of their heads, hanging them or burning them alive in crematorium’s furnaces as he did with the American pilots. But he was merely a pawn among the killers.”

One of the captured Germans was also Claus Schilling, a professor of the Berlin university, responsible for conducting pseudo-medical experiments at the malaria “ward”, in barrack 5. He, like many other German doctors, chose mainly Polish priests for his immoral experiments.

Not all the prisoners immediately demanded revenge and punishment for the murderers. Cardinal Adam Kozłowiecki (prisoner number 22187) noted this in his memoirs:

“Some of the prisoners ran to the towers to disarm the surrendering, non-resisting soldiers of the SS. Nowicki, who witnessed these scenes, told me that the Germans were being beaten, kicked and scratched, despite having their hands in the air. I’m strongly against such behaviour. [...]. We demand justice, not mindless revenge.”

Priest Leon Stępniaak (prisoner number 22036) remembered this about the liberation day:

“It was a beautiful, sunny weather. We were in the middle of a prayer, when we heard the American soldiers coming – a small unit as it later turned out. Anyone strong enough to walk, ran outside to greet them. An American priest said <Our father> and shouted to the prisoners: <You’re free>. Happiness and joy filled the camp in different languages, the US soldiers got an ovation. There were 33 thousand of us, all from different parts of Europe conquered by Germany. We were hugging each other and laughing. It was the first time we felt truly happy, after so many years of torment and suffering. We, Poles sang <Nie rzucim

ziemi> [“Rota”, a famous Polish patriotic poem]. National flags, which we had crafted in conspiracy, hanged on the blocs. An American flag, among flags of allied countries, hanged above the office buildings, the Polish white and red one as well. [...] We felt free. Dressed in civilian clothes, we held a holy mass at the bloc 26 chapel. 10 thousand Poles participated. We put all the species of flowers we grew for the past couple of months in the experimental garden, at the altar. We sang <Te Deum laudamus>.”



US soldiers next to the “death train”



Loading bodies on a cart

What were we supposed to do?

The Americans were horrified by what they found in Dachau. The camp’s liberation came at the time of the greatest hunger. Food packages hadn’t been arriving. There were instances, when those who passed away were being covered with blankets, so someone could take their portion of bread or a bowl of soup. Huge meals provided by the Americans got rid of the initial hunger, but also caused a lot of deaths. Electricity and water were cut off, ambulatories empty, food storages cleared out and the wardrobes taken away.

The camp's overcrowding hit its peak in 1944, when thousands of people were transferred from the already evacuated concentration camps, e.g. Auschwitz or Buchenwald. Prisoners who didn't die on the way, were in the state of total exhaustion.

The Americans took citizens of the city of Dachau to show them the scale of Nazi crimes. The German women were ordered to clean up the train cars after the dead. All the citizens were to witness the camp, the corpses and the funerals, or they wouldn't be granted food stamps. 7.5 thousand bodies, which the Germans failed to cremate, were taken to the Leitenberg cemetery through the streets of Dachau for its citizens to see what their compatriots had done. The evidence gathered by col. William Quinn point to the fact that the residents of Dachau knew about the barbaric acts committed by the SS; however, not many condemned those acts. Some of them used the prisoners for work treating them like less than nothing, others were simply threatened. After the war, most of them said: "What were we supposed to do?".

As a sign of gratitude, Poles prepared a thanksgiving mass on May 3rd, 1945. A six metre tall cross, surrounded by 7 masts with national flags, was placed at the camp's square. The masts had eagles at their tops, and engraved dates 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945. Under the cross was an altar with a painting of Mother Mary the Queen of Poland, painted by priest Władysław Sarnik (prisoner number 22327). By the end of May, the painting along with a group of priests were transported to Freimann, where a temporary camp was established. The priests later moved to France and the painting disappeared. The cross was still standing in the 60's, fresh flowers were always laid underneath. A funeral mass in memory of the prisoners who perished in the camp took place on May 4th in front of the altar.



► Ołtarz przygotowany przez Polaków na uroczystą mszę św. dziękczynną, która została odprawiona 3 maja 1945 roku

**Altar prepared for a solemn
thanksgiving mass (AIPN)**

Immediately after the liberation, the International Prisoner Committee, created by the inmates, took responsibility for keeping the camp in order. Both healthy and ill were moved to the barracks of the SS. Each nationality established its own bloc committee, which goal was to coordinate the affairs of its group, in accordance with the command. Poles created the Polish National Committee, consisting of several departments: the disciplinary-legal; scientific; statistical; cultural-educational; press; medical and economical. Camp newspapers were published not soon after: "Głos Polski" ["The voice of Poland"] (created by the Polish Committee); "Wiarus" ["Experienced veteran"] - for the soldiers; and a religious weekly "Polska Chrystusowi" ["Poland for Christ"]. The commander of the Polish group became lieut. Marian Jungherz, a liaison officer of the 7th army. The most important responsibility of the committees was organising transports back to prisoners' homelands.

"They were supposed to abolish the camp by May 26th - wrote priest Woś. - the nations, which have the possibility to return to their countries, will be sent there, but those who can't go back - like us Poles - for some reasons, will be sent wherever they choose to. The Dutch and Belgians are already leaving. Another 300 haeflings escaped; they couldn't wait for the evacuation [...]. On May 10th [1945] the Polish government closed the deal with the Allied commanders concerning the evacuation of Poles from work and concentration camps in Germany."

Every prisoner had to fill in a personal survey. At first, return trips to Poland were forbidden, so Poles often joined other groups, e.g. the Czech. Americans argued, that they lacked means of transportation and implied, that Poles could be arrested upon return and sent deep into Russia. Many western nationalities were leaving the camp, but Poles were still waiting. Unrest among them grew. In a letter from May 30th, 1945 to the president-in-exile residing in London, Władysław Raczkiewicz signed by, among others, the camp's head secretary, Jan Domagała the Polish prisoners complained about the horrible conditions in the camp after the liberation, the lack of clothing and proper care, bad treatment. Before the repatriation was organised, former inmates had been moved to temporary camps in Germany. Most of the Poles were put in barracks previously occupied by the SS in a town of Freimann, near Munich.

As a sign of gratitude, Poles prepared a thanksgiving mass on May 3rd, 1945. A six metre tall cross, surrounded by 7 masts with national flags, was placed at the camp's square. The masts had eagles at their tops, and engraved dates 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945. Under the cross was an altar with a painting of Mother Mary the Queen of Poland, painted by priest Władysław Sarnik (prisoner number 22327).

Some Poles returned to Poland – despite the warnings of “bolshevism” – others spread around all of Europe awaiting political stability in their home country. Some of them left for Canada and the United States.

Priests went mainly to their congregations in France and Italy. Some of them later became missionaries, e.g. Verbite, priest Marian Żelazek; Jesuit, priest Adam Kozłowiecki and Franciscan, priest Zbigniew Młynik. Mieczysław Grabiński, a Polish ambassador in Munich prior to the war, left for England in 1949. In 1939, he was arrested and sent to Dachau. Between 1945-1949 he held the office, among others, of the delegate of the Polish foreign minister in the American zone in Germany. Professor Kazimierz Drewnowski returned to Poland.

In December, 1945 the US court-martial sentenced 36 high-ranking KL Dachau officers of the SS to death by hanging. The sentence was carried out in May, 1946. Most of the camp's SS crew, managed to avoid justice. Only 1.3% of the camp crew was prosecuted.

Article from no. 2/2012 of the “Pamięć.pl” monthly