

--Florida when I was an army infantryman in World War II. My talk deals with the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp on-- by the American Army on the 29th of April, 1945. Today, we have neo-Nazis and antisemitic self-styled historians who claim that the Holocaust never occurred and that it is a myth invented by the Jew. I was an infantryman who entered the camp on the liberation day. And let me tell you, what I saw was no myth.

I like to go into a little background history of the Dachau concentration camp. The Dachau camp was the first Nazi concentration camp built and among the last to be liberated. A few days later, the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria was freed on the 5th of May, 1945, thus ending the Holocaust nightmare for the European Jews.

In 1933, when Hitler became the chancellor of Germany, Heinrich Himmler at the time was the police commissioner of the city of Munich. He submitted an article in a Munich newspaper, where he announced the construction of a new kind of a prison camp to be built near the city of Dachau, which was about 11 miles northwest of Munich. He forewarned that the prison would be run without scruples or compassion.

Actually, the Nazis built the prison that would become an instrument of terror, whereby they were able to keep in line Hitler's enemies and members-- and the citizens of Germany. The prison opened on the 22nd of March, 1933 with the purpose of housing and rehabilitating the enemies of the Nazi regime.

A mammoth SS facility was added to the prison in 1937, where the SS men were trained to staff the concentration camps and also taught the arts of murder and intimidation. Also in 1937, towards the end of the year, a medical experimental facility was added, where live prisoners were used as guinea pigs for experiments in military survival.

Himmler, who headed the SS organization, formed a permanent prison guard, called the Death Heads, or Totenkopfs. These men were selected from the rural area, where antisemitism ran high. Most of these SS guards had criminal records before they were appointed as guards. As a matter of fact, the first commander of the Dachau camp, Theodore Eicke, he was released from an insane asylum only a year earlier.

He instituted a set of rules for the camps which was followed and adopted by all other concentration camps. He called for instant shooting or hanging any prisoner who disobeyed an order given by the guard, or one who struck a guard, any who tried to escape-- and very few ever did escape-- passing notes to Red Cross inspectors, and inducing others to escape from the prison or setting fires.

The first reported killing in Dachau occurred on the 25th of May of the same year it opened, 1933. The public prosecutor at that time, with the approval of Himmler, he began an investigation. But the murderer, a prison guard, was never brought to justice. Other killings in the prison followed. But this time, Commander Eicke and Himmler would immediately dismiss all charges.

Himmler would react violently when a public prosecutor tried to perform an investigation of a murder in Dachau. He finally succeeded in inducing the prosecutors to join the SS. He offered them a higher salary. And investigations came to a halt. And then finally, the German courts ruled that all actions of the SS are legal, since they were an arm of the state, following the orders of the Führer, Adolf Hitler.

In appearance, the Dachau camp resembled an American military post. One passed tree-lined streets, beautiful streets, with beautiful homes, which were occupied by SS officers and their families. There were barracks for the officers and the enlisted men. There were a hospital. There was a large swimming pool. They had a large rifle range. There were some factories, which turned out porcelain objects, religious objects, bicycle parts, and some clothing.

In the northeast corner of that prison, of that sector of Dachau, was the infamous prison. It was surrounded by a 10-foot-high electric fence. And that was surrounded by a 15-foot moat. On the other side of the moat were the dog kennels, which housed 120 large attack dogs.

Plans for the prison called for 5,000 prisoners maximum. However, on liberation day, the camp held 32,000 prisoners. And a few days earlier, it had as much as 46,000 prisoners. There were 34 barracks which housed the prisoners. And the

barracks were split in half by the prisoner street, thus there were 17 barracks on each side of the street. Each barrack had 52 double-tier bunks. And most barracks had no toilets, so the prisoners had to visit other barracks to relieve themselves or obtain a drink of water.

South of the barracks was a large square, known as the Appellplatz. A roll call took place in the square every morning and evening. Public hangings and whippings were held in the square in full view of the prisoners standing at attention. South of the square was a large U-shaped building, which housed the kitchen, and the showers, and some workshops.

The crematorium was located a short distance to the west of the prison. The crematorium was hidden by trees. So the prisoners were not-- were unable to see the structure. It was a long building with a large smokestack standing up near the center of the building. I seen outside the structure dead bodies piled up as high as the windowsill, stretching from one end of the building up to the main entrance.

Upon entering the building, and veering towards the right, was a room measuring around 20 by 40 feet, containing bodies stacked up to the ceiling awaiting cremation. The stench of the decaying bodies was enormous. Three ovens occupied the main area. I opened up an oven door and saw the skeletal remains of a victim.

There was a gas chamber on the site. But I did not see any dead bodies. A former prisoner named Gun later wrote a book in which he claims that 2,000 Polish and Hungarian Jews were gassed in the chamber. Some Holocaust scholars believed the chamber was used and that it was cleaned up before the arrival of the Americans.

In the yard behind the crematorium was a large mound, which was used to stop bullets leaving one's body. Many prisoners were beaten and clubbed at this mound. A working assignment feared by the prisoners was waking in the gravel pits. They were constantly beaten to increase their yield or they received a beating if they paused to rest.

Another despised job was hauling snow in the winter months. This task was generally delegated to Polish priests who were harnessed to wagons and forced to pull the load at a galloping speed to the dumping grounds. Camp material was transported at other times in a similar fashions.

Prisoners had to remove their cap when a guard passed them by or bow to a guard. Failure to do so meant a beating with any instrument that the guard had on hand. And many prisoners did not understand German. And this gave a guard an excuse to kill or beat a prisoner.

Prisoners considered themselves lucky when they were selected to work outside the camp in factories or military establishments just to get away from the sadist guards. When they arrived at their destination, the German Wehrmacht or army took over, and the prisoners received additional food, such as at lunchtime, they obtained a plate of soup and a slice of bread.

They were permitted to read the German newspapers and catch up with the news. They were elated when they read that America was entering the war. And Franklin Roosevelt became a hero for them. When they heard of the death of President Roosevelt, they had lost a friend and much hope. A number committed suicide upon hearing the news.

In the medical facility, a Dr. Asher and a Professor Schilling, who was well-renowned, performed experiments on humans related to military survival. The experiments consisted of immersing prisoners in ice water. And other prisoners were exposed to frigid conditions other than water. Victims were exposed to high altitude pressure conditions. And others were suspended in parachute harnesses for a prolonged period of time.

Parts of one cheek was removed to study coagulation and resistances to infection. Prisoners were shot to study wound mending. Prisoners were injected with typhus and pus in search for cures. Others were tested to see the amount of salt that they can assume. The prisoners either died during the experiment or were exterminated after the ordeal.

Near the end of April 1945, the American Army was fighting its way towards Munich, when an urgent message was received by the 157th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Division to send a detachment to liberate the Dachau concentration camp. The regiment selected its Third Battalion, commanded by a Colonel Sparks as the main strike force. Colonel

Sparks chose his I Company to spearhead the attack and M Company with its heavy weapons to assist.

Now, these soldiers of the 45th Division were known as the Thunderbirds-- had seen lots of combat. They were in action in Salerno, Italy, and Anzio, and the beachhead of Southern France. They moved up France, they liberated Alsace, the Rhineland, and they fought in Nuremberg, and finally captured Munich.

Private First Class Degro was selected as the lead scout. And the route selected was to walk down the tracks which led to the concentration camp. Private First Class Degro came across 39 cars, consisting of cattle cars and gondola types.

When he reached the parked train, he seen over 2,000 dead bodies. And there were several dead bodies lying on the tracks. But they were the bodies of the prisoners who tried to escape. Only seven prisoners were found alive, but they died within a few days. The Americans had never seen such a sight and swore revenge that no SS would be taken alive.

Now, as they passed the train, right near the train was a hospital. When they entered the hospital and seen how comfortable the patients were, they ordered everyone out, regardless of their condition. Private First Class Degro now advanced. He came across a cross in the closure which had a locked gate and he shot the lock off. And Americans then entered the prison compound.

Up to this point, the SS did not engage the Americans. Colonel Sparks spread his men around the barracks for protection. One of the tower guards began to fire with his machine gun. The fire was returned and he was killed. The other tower guard, seeing the large number of Americans entering the camp, either surrendered or fled. Those who surrendered were shot on the spot. Sporadic firing-- there was firing from the barracks. And the firing lasted around an hour. And then finally, the camp was secured.

No American lost his life in the battle. However, around 30 SS were killed in the combat. Another 120 were shot on the spot. About 40 other SS guards were killed by the prisoners, but that included the kapos, informers, and SS who donned prisoner's uniforms.

The Americans rounded up another 400-- rather, 348 SS men, who surrendered. They lined them up along a long wall near the hospital. They set up two machine guns. And finally, the gunners were given an order to shoot them down. Some SS feigned death, while others, who were badly wounded, begged to be killed.

The Americans obliged by giving pistols to four prisoners who were standing nearby. The four passed down the line, firing into the heads of those alive. The only SS to get out alive from Dachau were the doctors and the medics. Some Americans watched as prisoners were killing SS guards with shovels. And an American officer was seen clubbing an SS guard with the butt of his rifle to death.

The prisoners were aware that the Americans were getting close by the sound of the explosion. But they had no idea what the SS would have in store for them. So they developed a strong fear.

Unknown to the prisoners was that Himmler had ordered the camp commander to kill all the prisoners before the arrival of the Americans. The camp commander wanted to surrender the camp, but Himmler turned down the request. Why Himmler's order was not followed is unknown. The camp commander left the camp the day earlier with his aides, and he headed for satellite camps. And the following day, he committed suicide.

When the prisoners caught sight of the Americans in the camp, pandemonium erupted and they all shouted, the Americans are here, and we are finally free. The celebration continued all day and night. The prisoners raided the kitchen and they managed to find bags of potatoes. And they were found cooking the potatoes in the alleyway all day long. The Americans gave them their ration boxes, their cigarettes, candy, and some Americans took off their jackets and gave them to the needy ones.

Among the prisoners liberated were Leon Blum, who was the premier of France. Stalin's son was liberated. Molotov's nephew was liberated. Pasteur Niemoller, who was the German submarine hero, was liberated, and others of nobility rank.

The vile reputation of the Dachau camp was known to most of the American soldiers. But coming to face with the hundreds of dead bodies and living skeletons shocked the Americans. I entered a barrack where the emaciated victims were lying on the bunks. But all managed to smile when they saw me and greeted me.

And two Catholic priests outside on the street approached me and asked for some cigarettes. They were dressed in their long cassock attire. But most outstanding was the wide white collar around their thin necks. They could have not weighed more than 90 pounds.

I recognized some Jews by their yellow markings. I approached them and spoke to them in Yiddish. And one word kept repeating, the word was schmitz. They were always being clubbed for almost-- just at the whim of a guard and mostly because they were Jewish.

The following day, my company left the camp to rejoin the division in the Battle of Munich. American soldiers of nearby units were brought into the camp to bear witness to the atrocities. Movie photographers and scout planes were taking shots of the horrible scenes.

The army had some Germans from the city of Dachau come in, and clean up the mess, and bury the dead. The Germans appeared shocked at the sight, for many were acquaintances of the SS guards. I talked with the wife of an SS guard, who told me that her prisoner was not a guard and that her husband was a barber in the camp and never killed any prisoner.

Munich fell to the Americans in a few days, and the war ended. However, my company was returned to guard the Dachau camp a second time. The camp now had an SS compound housing mostly the SS Waffen troops.

The SS compound also held the SS tank unit that captured a complete American field artillery at Malmedy during the first day of the Battle of the Bulge. The Americans had surrendered, but they were all shot down. These SS men were later tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. I learned later that because of the harsh treatment that they received from the American prison guards, they were never executed.

I guarded some of the SS and work details. And they swore that they were always front line troops and never served in any concentration camp. I was also stationed to guard a gate adjacent to the women barracks.

Most women were ill. And there were no toilets in their barrack, so they had to visit the adjacent building to relieve themselves. Most were too weak to make it. As they exited their barrack, they had to squat down to relieve themselves. A young girl around the age of 12 showed me the whip lashes across her back, and there were many of them, which she received for stealing a potato to give to her sick sister.

The Germans of Dachau, of the city of Dachau, told me they knew nothing what went on inside the camp. They were forbidden to approach the camp or the railroad tracks leading to the camp. They did hear the wailing of the prisoners in the cattle cars as the cars passed slowly by. They saw the constant black smoke coming from the crematory chimney. And they were angered because the soot from the smoke would dirty their laundry which was on the line. A few saw dead bodies being carried out of the camp on carts.

Although Germany had numerous concentration camps, the German government preserved only one-- the Dachau concentration camp. It is the most toured concentration camp by people of the Western countries. There is a charge to enter the camp today. There is a museum that contains large pictures of the atrocities. There is a Carmelite convent on the ground in memory of the Jesuit priest Adolph Delp, who was murdered in the camp for participating in the assassination of Hitler. And there are a number of religious memorial structures in the camp.

The Dachau citizens, however, are not pleased to have the Holocaust memorial in their backyard. They want the Holocaust to be totally forgotten and let bygones be bygones. The young Dachau Germans claim that they're not responsible for the acts of their parents. And yet, I heard that many of them are still strongly antisemitic. Thank you for the--

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Thank you, Mr. Cohen, for an enlightening talk. Mr. Allen Cohen is a member of our post number 759, Orlando, Florida of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States. Let's give Allen another round of applause for being.