

THE RAVAGES OF GENOCIDE

By Karen Lesiak, Hartford, Connecticut, Digitizing Partner

Last year, prompted by an e-mail I received from CRRA regarding Notre Dame's desire to contribute to the History Unfolded project of the US National Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, I embarked upon a journey to research some key events leading up to and associated with the Allied war against the Nazi regime. I have always had a special interest in the topic as, for one, my father was an Army Air Force pilot during World War II and participated in fifty-nine missions in the European theater to halt the German advance. Like many of us, I have sought to understand the escalating reality of the Nazi power that came to be and its horrific disregard for humanity in all its aspects. Thirteen years ago, US National Holocaust Museum researchers began cataloging ghettos, forced labor camps, and concentration and death camps throughout Europe. The grim discovery was that substantially more innocent victims were killed under the Nazi regime than had been previously determined.

With the liberation of the concentration camps at the end of World War II, we have been forever changed by this tragedy of grand proportion, with millions having died unfathomable deaths at the hands of their captors. We are still perplexed by the hostility and atrocities that were inflicted upon the Jews; other ethnicities and religions; those who were disabled, homosexuals, mothers, and children; and others unmercifully targeted by the Nazis, and we will forever examine its impact on generations before and after us.

We can gain significant insights by hearing the voices of Holocaust survivors and teaching others about this insidious campaign of genocide so that it may never be forgotten. One of these survivors, Shep Zitler, was a former Polish citizen who lost most of his family and friends to Nazi persecution. Zitler visited the campus at the Academy of Our Lady in Marrero, Louisiana, to share his stories and experiences with senior students who were working on Holocaust projects while studying theology and social justice. He stressed the importance of teaching today's youth about the importance of the Holocaust. John Menzer, who worked with Zitler, stated, "If we allow the memory of the Holocaust victims to pass away, they will die a second death."

At Castelgandolfo, Italy, in 1965, Pope Paul VI welcomed about 250 veterans of World War II and expressed his gratitude at seeing "...men once divided by the absurd necessity of war..." and told them, "Your presence as the survivors of the violence of combat, though bearing the marks of that danger and courage, tells the world how great the desire for peace is in the family of man."

To get a Catholic perspective on the Holocaust, I searched the Catholic News Archive (thecatholicnewsarchive.org) to gain greater awareness and broaden my understanding of this dark time in history, tracing a progression of events from the onset of Nazi domination to the advent of World War II in Europe, which ultimately led to the fall of the Third Reich and the liberation of prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps.

Martyr Of Auschwitz

Mass Remembers Kolbe

By ROBERT JOHNSTON

New York—(RNS)—One of the thousands of Polish-American Catholics attending a special Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral here remembers the frail, sickly Franciscan priest well. In fact, he remembers everything about the Auschwitz death camp—too well.

"When most prisoners were put into the cellar at Block 11 to die of starvation, you could hear subdued crying, moaning and wailing," said Walter Szczepniak of Mt. Vernon, "but when the Franciscan went in, all we heard was subdued praying."

The Franciscan was Father Maximilian Kolbe, O.F.M. Conv., who perished in 1941 in the infamous Nazi death camp and has since been declared "blessed" by the Catholic Church. He died from forced starvation and a "merciful" injection of acid by Nazi SS troops.

"His guards went down and found that he was the last of the 10 still alive but they couldn't withstand his eyes," said Szczepniak, recounting a story that permeated the camp after the priest's death.

"So they injected acid into his veins to get rid of him," he added.

Execution

Szczepniak, who was confined to several Nazi prison camps between 1941 and 1945 and was liberated by United States forces in Germany under Gen. George Patton, had known Father Kolbe at Auschwitz. He actually witnessed the priest's slow execution.

"He was a saint then, and we all knew it," he observed. "Although he was physically small and sickly—he was treated for pneumonia and tuberculosis by the Nazis—there was always a blessed peace on his face. And this in a place where people lived and behaved like animals."

Father Kolbe, a well-known Polish journalist, the founder of the international Marian movement known as the Militia of the Immaculata, "completely stunned" the prisoners at Auschwitz, said Szczepniak when he stepped forward to take the place of a condemned man.

With nine others, condemned to death by starvation because one prisoner had escaped, Father Kolbe was stripped and left without food and water. The priest was the last to die after two to three weeks.

Szczepniak, a native of Boston who went back to Poland when he was a small child, had been active in the Polish underground and was captured when he tried to escape to the West through Czechoslovakia. He returned to the United States in 1946 and for seven years was editor-in-chief of the Polish Daily Courier in Boston.

After working for Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America, he now owns an insurance and travel agency in Hempstead, Long Island. He is one of 20 former Polish



Mass For Father Kolbe

Father Michael Zembrzinski, vicar general of Pauline Order and founder of Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Pennsylvania, delivers homily at Mass in New York's St. Patrick Cathedral commemorating beatification of

Father Maximilian Kolbe. Thousands of Polish-Americans attended Mass for priest who gave his life for another prisoner at Auschwitz death camp and since has been declared blessed by Church. (RNS Photo)

prisoners who helped sponsor the commemorative Mass for the Polish martyr offered by Terence Cardinal Cooke of New York. Father Michael Zembrzinski, vicar general of the Pauline order and founder of the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Pennsylvania, preached.

Although Szczepniak did not return to Poland until some years after the war, he said that when he returned Father Kolbe was "already a saint. Poles have been praying to him for years."

Retelling the effect that Father Kolbe had on the inmates at Auschwitz, Szczepniak said "everyone knew him when he arrived (he was arrested mainly for hiding Jews), and soon the news spread that he was secretly hearing, confessing and preaching all over the camp."

Szczepniak said that during two weeks he worked alongside the priest, shoveling gravel around a crematorium, Father Kolbe never

uttered a sigh or groan. "It was long hours, heavy work and little food and water and we had to run everywhere we went or the guards would beat us."

"I can manage," he would say, and refuse all help, even though he was extremely weak. And he was always praying, inspiring everyone he met."

When one of 10 prisoners chosen for death began lamenting the loss of his family, Father Kolbe stepped forward, said Szczepniak, "and he told 'Bloody' Prisch, the SS commander, 'I want to give my life for this man.'"

"He shocked and moved the Nazi leader," he said, and the commander asked him "who he was and what he did." But Father Kolbe answered simply, "I am a Catholic priest." The Nazi hesitated and then allowed him to take the other man's place.

"Despite our brutalized condition, we knew we were in the presence of a saint," Szczepniak declared.

"Martyr of Auschwitz Mass Remembers Kolbe," *The Catholic Transcript*, Volume LXXIV, Number 50, 7 April 1972.

Search terms: Nazi, Nazis, Nazi Germany, Hitler, Munich, Faulhaber, Third Reich, Dachau, Holocaust, Holocaust survivors, concentration camps, refugees, veterans, World War II.

Articles Researched in the Catholic News Archive, Catholic Research Resources Alliance:

15 June 1933. Dr. Max Jordan. *Mass prevented as Hitler Forces Attack Meeting...* "Clashes between the Catholics at the national convention of Roman Catholic Journeymen, held in Munich, and the Nazis, in that city, came to a climax on last Saturday, as the Nazi

storm troopers forcibly prevented Cardinal Faulhaber, the Archbishop of Munich, from celebrating Mass in the convention hall." — *The Catholic Transcript* (Hartford, CT)

22 Oct. 1938. *German Emigres need aid of all Catholics Says Report to United States Bishops...* "... a conservative estimate places at 7,000 the number of Catholic refugees outside of Germany but still in Europe and that nobody can foresee to what extent the refugee problem will grow." — *The Monitor* (San Francisco, CA)

12 June 1939. *Reich intends to deprive Church of all influence of education...* "The Church is enjoined from exercising any influence whatever on school activities." — *Catholic News Service Newsfeeds* (U.S.)

11 July 1941. *Church is Forced Underground in Poland.* "Faithful Secretly Gather in Caves in Wee Hours for Mass." — *St. Louis Register* (St. Louis, MO)

10 Sept. 1965. *Pope Receives War Veterans.* "Several hundred ex-soldiers who took part in the battle of Monte Cassino were welcomed by Pope Paul..." — *The Catholic Transcript* (Hartford, CT)

8 Dec. 1978. John S. Kennedy. *The Liberation of Dachau.* A review of Michael Selzer's book *Deliverance Day* "of the reconstruction of the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in Germany on April 29, 1945." — *The Catholic Transcript* (Hartford, CT)

24 Nov. 2007. Blair Bordelon. *Teen Faith: Holocaust Survivor visits AOL.* "Students working on Holocaust-era assignments at Academy of Our Lady in Marrero were treated to a poignant testimonial Oct. 23 from Shep Zitler..." — *The Clarion Herald* (New Orleans, LA)

For other resources on the Nazi persecution, search "Holocaust" and "browse all records" in the Catholic Portal (www.catholicresearch.org). Under Format, click on "Archival Materials" to find relevant collections. Seton Hall's Walsh Library houses the Edward H.

The Liberation Of Dachau

By JOHN S. KENNEDY

Michael Selzer's book "Deliverance Day" (Lippincott, 233 pages, illustrated, \$19.95) purports to be a reconstruction of the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in Germany on April 29, 1945.

In an author's note, Professor Selzer explains that only three of the many people who appear in the book do so under their own names. The three are a pair of German officers and an American chaplain, Rabbi David Eichhorn.

He also tells us that as he interviewed many of the people whose stories figure in the book, he paid attention to their personalities and thereby gained an "insight" which "has strongly colored my telling of their reports." I don't understand what that means.

Combined

Then he adds that in most cases he has combined parts of different people's stories into a single account, so that "there are in almost every instance additional episodes, experiences, and insights that do not belong to that individual but to another."

Professor Selzer is frank in admitting this management of his material, but his candor does not dispel one's doubts as to the legitimacy of such procedure and the reliability of individual episodes in the narrative of the liberation of Dachau.

A professor of political science at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Mr. Selzer is identified on his book's jacket as "a specialist in the field of Jewish studies."

He says that he chose to write of Dachau because it was the first Nazi concentration camp, having been set up in 1933, because it was liberated by the United States Army, and because it had a heterogeneous population.

Jews

As to the last, he remarks that "Dachau's Jewish population was always only a small proportion of the prisoners there," although over the years thousands of Jews were murdered in the camp.

Individuals of many nationalities

balancing the books

are portrayed in the book: Russian, Dutch, Belgian, French, German, Hungarian. One Pole is mentioned by pseudonym, and there are two brief, vague references to Polish priests among the prisoners and later memorialized.

Professor Selzer aligns strong anti-Semitic attitudes and actions on the part of Polish prisoners in Dachau, climaxing in their attempt, at first successful, to prevent an open air Jewish religious ceremony to be conducted by Rabbi Eichhorn, after the arrival of the American forces.

After reading this book, I talked with Monsignor John P. Wodarski, pastor of Holy Cross Church, New Britain, who was an Army chaplain in World War II and was in Dachau for three days at the time of its liberation.

When he got into the concentration camp, the first prisoner he met was a Polish priest. The newcomer wanted to know whether there were other Polish priests in the camp. Yes, was the answer, about 700. Three years earlier the number was over 1,700. And where were the others now? The Polish priest pointed to the ground.

Monsignor Wodarski was brought into one of the large buildings of the camp, and all the Polish priests were assembled to meet him. He was asked to address them, and got up on a table so as to see them all and be seen. He was almost overcome as he looked down into those terribly pale and emaciated faces.

Breviaries

At the conclusion of his remarks, he asked them what he could get for them. He was thinking of the food supplies which the Army would be making available, of tobacco, and clothing. Their answer amazed him. They begged for breviaries, so as to be able to resume praying the prayer of the universal Church.

He heard that during the last days before the liberation, a Bel-

gian priest would offer Mass clandestinely in one of the barracks. The Polish priests knew of this, but could not go into the barracks in question. However, they could pass by it, and as they did so they would touch its walls. This gave them some sense of contact with the Mass, and some comfort. It seems to me that the numbers and the stories of these Polish priests, men of fortitude and charity, deserve a page at least in a book intended to be representative of the experience and the freeing of Dachau. The information was readily available to any researcher.

Strictures

I regret these strictures, because the story of Dachau needs to be told and retold, and Professor Selzer reminds us of its myriad, massive evils. From first to last, about a quarter of a million people were imprisoned there. As many as forty or fifty thousand met their deaths there. When the Americans arrived, there were thirty thousand prisoners, and about eight thousand corpses.

The Americans were overwhelmed with horror by what they discovered. On a railway siding, for example, there was a train of 40 cars loaded with corpses. Out of the 3,400 prisoners who had been packed into it, alive, at Buchenwald for transfer to Dachau, only one man survived.

At the crematorium, the liberators came upon a room in which naked bodies were slacked from the floor to ceiling. Because of the approach of the Americans, the Nazi personnel had to leave off the daily burning quota. Also there were the ravages of unchecked disease, such as typhus and tuberculosis, killing hundreds each day.

Cruelty

Horifying, too, are the stories of the sadistic cruelty to which the prisoners had been subjected. A prisoner knew "that under article 12 of the Dachau code a prisoner could be executed on the spot, virtually at the whim of a guard." This happened often.

But even if one's life was spared, there was sadistic torment of many kinds to be endured, and the

hunger and the berthing. At the last, as the Americans were known to be advancing, there was the fear of mass execution. This had, in fact, been ordered by Heinrich Himmler, but it was prevented.

For some prisoners the yearning for freedom gave way to fear of freedom as liberation drew near. One prisoner's thought is reported thus: "Could it really be that at a certain level they didn't want to be set free from the ghastly torment of Dachau? ... Was there something in the camp that man didn't want to lose? Or something out there, in the world where life was lived, that they were afraid of?"

Post-Liberation

Brief summaries of the post-liberation lives of some of the individuals (or composites) featured in the book are given. For example, the solitary survivor of the death train, so-called Yaakov Kovner, later met and married another ex-prisoner. They came to the United States, had two children who are now, respectively, a teacher and an engineer. The Kovners have a small dry-goods store in the Bronx.

A Communist survivor of the concentration camps "That's just bourgeois propaganda," he replied. But a Hungarian survivor who returned to his own country, died in a Soviet concentration camp in 1948.



Liberated Prisoners Raise American Flag

"The Liberation of Dachau," *The Catholic Transcript*, Volume LXXI, Number 31, 8 December 1978.

Flannery Papers, 1965-1996. Edward H. Flannery was a priest for the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, ordained in 1937, who served as associate director of the Institute of Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University (1965-1967), as president of the US Commission on the Holocaust (1979), and as president of the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel (1985-1988). Included are papers on issues within the Catholic Church along with Jewish-Christian relations.

Learn about the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), a Nazi refugee, including her famed examinations of Nazi totalitarianism and the nature of evil, in a talk given by Fordham University professor Gail Presby to a *Catholic Worker* Friday night meeting in New York. Presby has written several works about Arendt that can be found in the collection at Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University. Hannah Arendt met and was a contemporary of Dorothy Day (1897-1980). ■

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