

A Talk presented to the International Liberators Conference of 1981  
by

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" I WAS THERE "

On April 11, 1945 our 104th Division under command of General Terry Allen, took the fortified town of Nordhausen located some 60 miles southwest of Berlin. The capture of this town was the culmination of much hard fighting and having taken the site one could readily see why such strong resistance was met. The Division stepped into a world difficult to describe although many have tried to do so adequately but fail. It was a world of horror, tragedy....a concentration camp! It was Nordhausen, a sub camp of the dreaded Buchenwald. It is said we discovered 6000 political prisoners but alas 5000 were corpses. A sight beyond description, mutilated, beaten, starved skeletons. 1000 were "living" in various stages of decay, merely breathing among the already dead. The call went out for medical personnel, the 329th Medical Battalion of the 104th was first on the scene. Having seen the disaster the call was again sounded and all units of the 104th were ordered to the camp. Convoys of trucks brought the American troops to assist in the overwhelming task, to save the living if possible and to bury the dead. As it was my wont during combat I stationed myself at the Regimental forward aid station to be of assistance to all my men. The urgent call having come for medics I joined them and came upon the again undescrivable and humbling catastrophe. The first and monumental task was to administer to the living. Here the American G.I. was superb working under the direction of the equally heroic doctors together they saved the savable and put forth their best effort in the cause. I have seen as many as 125 wounded a night in our combat area of Belgium and Holland and assisted in preparing the wounded for surgery and the like but never have I seen such suffering and anguish. The gun and the pursuit of the enemy was dropped and all hands turned to the job here and now..helping the helpless. It was a busy scene soldiers as angels of mercy their reward if the patient was able a smile of gratitude. Deliverance at long last!

Our Division was in the area five to six days and after doing all that could be done for the survivors the attention had to be given to



the dead. Here extra help was urgently needed and the command came to conscript the able bodied men of the village. They came, some reluctantly, with as ordered, make shift litters, a sheet, a piece of carpet, a blanket even a door. The burial of some 5000 began carrying the bodies through the town to a prominent hill on the far side where a huge trench has been prepared. The trench was six foot deep and six foot wide to receive the many corpses to be laid at rest.

The men conscripted mainly denied knowledge of what went on behind the gates of the Nordhausen camp and what we can believe of this is divided and does provoke questions of honesty. The mass graves on that hill outside the village stands as an indictment. Assuredly I have not forgotten and on the occasion of our annual convention of the 104th division a special Memorial service is held in which is included the nameless victims of Nazism. Here is remembered the days when the chaplains offered the special prayers and fulfilled the rituals of their faith as the victims of hatred were placed in a now hallowed ground.

The war continued and after five or six days the command was given to move on. We discovered further evidence of the inhumanity of man and his cruelty when we ran across but two miles from the concentration camp a massive buzz bomb factory. Herein we are told over 25,000 slave laborers toiled for months in production of V-1 and V-2 bombs. Again it was the same, workers worked unfed until they dropped and then were abandoned and died and were cremated. Such a scene of horror!

We moved on, the war came to an end and we returned home, but the scene remained. One asks over and over again ..WHY? The question can be simplified and yet remains difficult..why does man do these things, why the inhumanity to fellow human beings? If ever I needed a reason for my having left the classroom at Providence College to join the combat troops as a spiritual adviser and priest it was at the scene of horror! It was a Nordhausen and the subsequent scenes of cruelty, the wholesale ignoring of the Judeo-Christian tradition..namely love God and love your neighbor that it all had a meaning. I had witnessed a sinister, brutal, cruel and utter disregard of human dignity. Facts and details overcome one as memory conjures up the scene over and over again. And, yes, my photographs bespeak a thousand words for the wholesale slaughter and slow death which was not restricted to men but to women and children also. I was present and saw the aftermath. I feel very keenly about death and the more so death in war. It was for this reason that I returned to France, Belgium, Italy, Holland and Germany after the war. I visited the cemeteries where our American dead lie ( in 1945 no American soldiers were buried in Germany) I found walking among the crosses and looking for my "buddies"



th t every sixth cross carried no name,rank and serial number  
but the poignant words, "Unknown but to God"

One is forced to reiterate the need for educating our people to need of unanimity and cooperation. Surely the vastness of man's inhumanity to men can convey to the mind the wisdom of sound theology and its application in our daily lives. Men may disagree but that does not destroy charity and love for each other. Again the call must go out that "free government is not lightly come by;nor is it lightly held. It is not to be bought,received as a gift,nor hit upon by accident,nor can it be compromised,maintained as such with its enemies,nor by the determined efforts of a few...it must be earned by a whole people,lived up to by a whole people and fought for to the death of everyone who shares its benefits"

Religion and Patriotism are not rival virtues but rather children of the same parent virtue,namely Justice. Allying these virtues was the theme of the words of General John J. Pershing who said,"As I see it,the defense of one's country is a religious as well as a patriotic duty. No man can be faithful to his religious obligation and fail in his duty to his nation. The system of defense that we stand for will become the surest guarantee of peace that could be devised"

Having seen the barbaric ravages of hatred and the parallel need of love of mankind cannot our closing prayer be a fervent plea to Almighty God that our actions be a dedication and an accepted responsibility of ever seeking out avenues of peace among all nations,and in such pursuits may we be God's willing and effective instruments. May God strengthen our resolve to work diligently to remove any likelihood of another genocide,the tragic consequence of the failure of man. Let us carry our theme of this conference, "Remembrance" to its ultimate conclusion recalling the words of Elie Wiesel,the chairman

"Unless we remember in good faith and in sincerity in the very depths of our being,we must not speak.

But speak we must.