Liberating Perspectives

We see through a lens. It can be a mental lens that determines our point of view. It can be an actual lens in the eye that can only capture bits and pieces of the complex reality before us. It can be the lens of a camera that captures light and preserves for us an image, frozen in time that can carry with it power and meaning.

It is a great honor for me to be able to share with you a story of one photograph taken over 60 years ago that has changed forever my own sense of our lenses and the power of an image to change the way we view a particular event in history.

We must pause to remember that the words we use reflect the complexity of our respective lenses. The Americans who were there at Dachau, April 29, 1945 call it “Liberation.” From the point of view of the soldiers and the prisoners of Dachau and many other camps- there is no question that this day reflected the road back to life having survived unimaginable suffering. For many, out of respect for the sacrifice and memory of those who fought to stop the Nazi regime, there is no question or challenge in using such a powerful word. And it should be understood in the context of the whole war experience.

However, “liberation” did not come at the hands of a policy to find, locate and “liberate” camps from the Nazis. It was more of an accidental discovery. Although the discoveries at the camps were difficult, gruesome and complex, there was the focused lens toward the military defeat of the Third Reich and the capture of Berlin, which would close this European war.

I come to this discussion with experience in the modern manifestations of the “Nazi” philosophy- an idea not yet eliminated from the human heart. In Omaha, Nebraska, we were able to address the challenges and opportunities of Holocaust education several years ago by recruiting an incredible professional Beth Seldin Dotan. Beth worked at the Ghetto Fighters House Museum in Israel for several years before returning to Omaha. We have been blessed to benefit from her perspective of having worked at a museum founded by survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto. These incredible teachers and models have never viewed the history of the Shoah through the lens of victimhood but from a lens of strength and survival in spite of the suffering.

Beth came into possession of the photo album of a man from Omaha, Lt. Col. Williams, who was there the days Dachau was discovered by American troops, April 29-30, 1945. Americans moving towards Berlin discover a camp, a very large camp called Dachau, a place we will visit this afternoon. Williams had a camera with him and as he had been doing since landing in Normandy, he recorded the trail of his personal journey through the war with photos. When he returned from the war, like so many others, he rarely spoke of this journey to family and friends. Through this one man’s story we see that grasping huge chunks of history is difficult and that individual stories provide a powerful lens through which we can connect to the deeper messages of history. “Testimonial portals” are the most common road into the stories of the dark of the Shoah.

The only recording we have of this one man’s experience of the day of “Liberation” is a moving letter he wrote the evening after. A letter written to his wife back home. It is a moving and a once in his lifetime written testimony of this day. I would like to read a selection from that letter.

Monday
30 April 45.

My Honey.

Had a new experience today that I will never forget as long as I live. I had read a lot about concentration camps and the brutal treatment given the prisoners but often wondered if it were all true. Now I can vouch for it. The camp covered an area of probably ten square blocks and much of it was surrounded by high cement walls with barbed wire on top and electric wires over those. A railroad runs through the camp and we saw an entire train of boxcars with dead human bodies that they had no time
to dispose of. Several press photographers were there so if you see any pictures in the newspapers or Life Magazine I would appreciate your letting me know and saving them for me. Some of our medics are in the pictures and they may even be shown in the movies as there was one movie camera there.

Inside the camp was one building used as a crematory rather it was built especially for that purpose. It had one room for showers which the prisoners could get wet and open up the pores of their skin then into the gas chamber. Here they were killed, removed and stacked like cardwood until they could be shoved in the ovens. They were stacked in four rooms and the boys estimated around 700 – 800 bodies awaiting cremating. Those laying in the box cars were nothing but skin and bone and on many, the thighs of their legs weren’t as big as my forearm. Inside the camp they had factories, machine shops, hospital, and foundries where they used the slave labor guarded by SS Troops to make the tools of war etc. In the largest single section of the camp was several thousand prisoners from every country in Europe and even some Americans. They were now displaying all their national flags and it was very colorful. We talked with one prisoner from Yugoslavia (formerly a bank vice-president) who had been there 20 months. His neighbor had reported him listening to BBC and American news broadcasts. He was well educated and spoke English very well. Around this section was barbed wire entanglements and cement pill boxes for the guards every few yards. There was also a deep ditch surrounding the section inside the wire. Outside there was a moat running around the section. They told us the men on the train had been riding without food for 18 days and the prisoners told us they worked 7 days a week from 5:00 AM until 8:00 PM. There were several guards still laying around the ground where they had been killed. Most of them they didn’t bother to shoot but merely beat them to death with rifle butts when our troops took over. Thousands of our troops visited the camp today and I doubt very much if there will be another SS Trooper taken prisoner. It is almost unbelievable that anyone could be hardened to the point of doing the brutal things they did and it certainly gives me a different viewpoint toward the German people. This is all probably boring to you but you just can’t picture such sights without seeing them with your own eyes.

Well darling guess that will be all for today except to tell you again I love you worlds.

Always Yours
Clarence.

One letter found in a shoe box stuffed with correspondence to his wife. On loan from Dr. Tom Williams, son of Staff Sergeant Clarence Williams of the 42nd Rainbow Infantry Division.

His photos and the letter, neatly collected and labeled were discovered by his family after his death and the family graciously shared these with us as a testimonial and honor to his war story.

In the many photos taken that day, one in particular strikes deeply. It reminds responsible people of the power of images, the care we must take not to minimize the death of so many unidentified souls. The sheer size of the events and the loss of life are so large it may tend to harden us to the reality and depth of the meaning for us. This one photo may help to illuminate the many facets, the multiple lenses that must be at work as we continue the hard task of peeling away the fog of war to find history and meaning and hopefully lessons.

We began to explore the one disturbing photo out of a need to triangulate the story of Lt. Col. Williams with the recorded and known events of that day. We discovered that two American military groups had entered Dachau on that day. The 42nd Infantry Rainbow Division of the Seventh Army and the 45th Thunderbird Division of the Third Army came from two sides of the camp. Much discussion and dispute about who “liberated” the camp and the timeline of the events of that day have taken up many pages and hours. The people who fought Hitler’s regime are deeply passionate about their role in this historic fight. It is beyond the scope of this discussion but a worthwhile subject to explore. The varied accounts of eyewitnesses on these two days helps magnify the reality of our lens analogy. No one can know for sure the events surrounding these days. There remains no question that these two military groups were in and around when the camp surrendered at 4:50 p.m. on April 29, 1945. The surrender was from SS Lieutenant Wickert, a low ranking Nazi whose boss had fled, to Brigadier General Henning Linden, Assistant Commander of the 42nd Rainbow Infantry Division. Linden had arrived at
the camp with a contingent that included a female journalist, dressed as a man to avoid difficulties in the war zone. The camp itself displays notices that acknowledge the role of both of these military groups in the discovery of the camp.

As American approached the camp, almost all who have written and spoken of that day talk about the smell. Another Omaha man, Bob Perelman relates, “The smell of death, the stink, the stench – it stays with you all your life – you can't forget it.” The stench came from the camp itself and from the “Death train”, parked outside the fence of Dachau behind the SS encampment. The train had 39 railcars.

The train had been on a three week attempt to relocate those on the train to other locations. The train had left Weimar, Germany on April 5, 1945 with over 80 prisoners in each car. They had come from a wide variety of places all being moved away from the front in attempt to hide from the oncoming Allied forces. They came from Langensalza a satellite camp of Buchenwald, mostly in good condition reflecting the situation in that particular camp. They came from the Dora V-2 rocket plants were conditions were much worse. The train came to Buchenwald and that camp was filled beyond capacity and the commandant refused to take more inmates. It was to travel for three days and rations for the three days were distributed at the start of this horrible journey. But the train went to Leipzig, to Dresden to the Protectorate of Bohemia and on to Passau, at each stop, more people were shoved onto the train with no provisions or facilities provided. The train eventually made its way to Dachau on April 27. Of the original over 5,000 people on the train, approximately 1,300 were alive when the train arrived at Dachau and entered the camp. Thousand had died on route, were removed at various stops and others added. Some had been shot at the arrival in Dachau. The train, when discovered by the advancing Americans, was filled with bodies – 2,310 bodies in all.

The actual takeover of the camp is a story of its own. But the “Death Train” became a symbol of the Nazi brutality, of the nature of the Nazi regime. For many American soldiers who viewed this site, it explained the emotions of long battles and finally put into focus the lens that explained why they were there fighting the Nazi regime. Eisenhower himself ordered that the train be left intact until May 13. Every available soldier and reporter was brought to this place. The bodies were only removed after these viewings. And of course many of the witnesses were taking photos. At the end of this gruesome display of death, the townspeople of Dachau removed the bodies and put them in a mass grave on Leitenberg Hill – forever overlooking the area.

Over the next few months, we learned what we could of these historical events, consulting books and memoirs, news accounts and original documents when we could find them. To our surprise, another photo was delivered to us even though we had not gone public with our discovery. It shook us deeply when we realized that these photos were of the same place – the same rail car – the same man – so disturbingly lying with eyes open on the pile of bodies.

Then we noticed that the two photos were not exactly the same. They were taken of the same scene but from slightly different angles – different camera – different photographers. We then realized the metaphor. Not only were we struggling to find the history of these days but to find the stories and the meanings. We were struck that so many who were there related their stories only very late in life and were also moved by how many must have seen this site or similar sites and never spoken of it. We were shaken by the realities of so many having important stories to tell dying without ever sharing what had happened to them.

This journey has led to discovering over 49 individual images of this same railcar. An 8 millimeter film of the same car was discovered.

Beth Seldin Dotan assembled a team that began work on a preliminary exhibit which we mounted in Omaha called “Liberating Perspectives”. This display of the photos and the accompanying discoveries illuminates that each G.I. took his own lens – actual or virtual – and captured this horrific scene. Each image taken from a slightly different angle – each person with his own reactions and histories, and each who survived – returning to life to somehow cope and integrate all that comes with war and with these particularly horrifying images emblazoned on their memories.

We wondered about the impact of those who returned and had to bury the memories to create a new reality in the civilian world. Today there is a reported explosion of Post traumatic Stress Disorder cases from Korean and World War II veterans. They returned to American soil and rarely told of the emotions
and power of the images they saw and how those memories have impacted their lives. Many became like the survivors of the Holocaust – reluctant or unable to talk or to adequately process their experiences. There are those who wrote or spoke of their experiences. But for the thousands who must have seen these images there are but a few who have spoken of them. For those whose lives live on many continue to suffer from untold effects from war.

The images we have collected tell us that at sometime, someone closed the eyes of the dead as the bodies were viewed. It touches the soul deeply thinking of the sensitivity of a person, forced to view this incomprehensible situation, taking a hand to the dead to give whatever small portion of dignity was possible. Our lenses were even further challenged upon the discovery that shortly after these events; the Seventh Army ordered a formal investigation of alleged mistreatment of German Guards on May 2, 1945.

The investigation was conducted by Lt. Col. Joseph M. Whitaker as the investigating officer. There remains some disputed facts about what occurred and why. But here are a few of the conclusions from the Whitaker report.

Four German soldiers surrendered and were made to climb into one of the boxcars filled with bodies and these men were killed by American soldiers. SS soldiers were round up and put into a separate enclosure. There is no dispute that 17 of these prisoners were shot and killed by machine gun and carbine fire. Others were wounded. A number of presumed SS men were captured around the camp tower and were summarily killed.

The report of the Investigating Officer Whitaker came to the conclusion that there were actions take at Dachau that were beyond the pale and should be followed up. His report was reviewed at a higher level and was followed up with a report from Wade H. Haislip, Lieutenant General, USA Command. This is from the summary paragraph of his report.

“This investigation indicates an apparent lack of comprehension on the part of the investigating officer of the normal disorganization of small unit combat action and of the unbalancing effects of the horrors and shock of Dachau on combat troops already fatigued with more than 30 days continuous combat action.”

In the opinion of the undersigned the investigation indicates further an apparent attempt to accentuate testimony unfavorable to the participants rather than to develop the investigation impartially. Since it is not felt that the foregoing investigation conducted by the Inspector General, this headquarters, gives a true and unbiased conclusion after considering all factors, including the extenuating circumstances, it is recommended that circumstances surrounding the alleged mistreatment and shooting of German guards at the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany, be re-investigated.

As we look back on the many ways in which the participants have characterized the trials and the motivations behind the trials, it is impossible not to wonder what must the child of an SS officer summarily killed after the surrender at Dachau feel like when he or she reads of our lofty discussions on how war crimes and crimes against humanity would be treated differently in accordance with the new Nuremberg proceedings? How do we all deal with a history when once exposed shows that in war – many things occur – and the notions of justice are challenged in ways that history alone cannot help us untangle? The lens we bring – like the lens of those American soldiers – each taking mental and actual photos of the horror of war – each lens leads us to new information, new thoughts and new challenges to consider. The processes of trying to find a new way to end a war and assign responsibility for crimes may not help untangle all the different perspectives hindsight provides us. The power and complexity of each situation we uncover, each new story we hear, each new layer of history that comes into the awareness of those who care, challenges our understandings of history and our ability to see the totality of each historical moment.

The power of a few photographs:
They remind us of the horror of war,
Of the difficulty of ever comprehending the totality of history,
And of the human need to continue to dig for kernels of truth.
Robert Wolfson

Perspektiven der Befreiung


Untersuchungen amerikanischer Militärbehörden zeigten Bilder, wie deutsche Soldaten in Dachau gezwungen worden waren, in einen mit Leichen gefüllten Wagon zu steigen, wo sie dann von amerikanischen Soldaten erschossen wurden; andere Bilder zeigten die Tötung von siebzehn gefangenen deutschen Soldaten – offensichtlich der SS angehörige Männer – mit Maschinengewehren, die ebenfalls kurzerhand exekutiert wurden.

Als verschiedene Redner im Laufe der Konferenz die Nürnberger Prozesse und die dahinterstehenden Motivationen beschrieben, tauchten Fragen auf wie jene, ob es möglich ist sich vorzustellen, was das Kind eines SS-Offiziers von Dachau, der nach der Niederlegung seiner Waffen von amerikanischen Soldaten standrechtlich erschossen wurde, wohl fühlt, wenn es heute unsere hochtrabenden Diskussionen liest, wie Kriegsverbrechen und Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit nun in Übereinstimmung mit den in Nürnberg abgehaltenen Verfahren anders gehandhabt werden?
