

The Believer and the Unbelievable

Dachau and the American Christian who Brought Nazi War Criminals to Justice

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Liberation troops trekking across Europe in the final days of World War II thought they had seen it all. Then they followed their noses and stumbled on camp Dachau and realized that until that moment they hadn't seen much of anything.

As they neared the camp, the U.S. Army 42nd Infantry Division, known as Rainbow, found a line of boxcars. What they discovered inside the cars had them doubting their eyes: more than two thousand bodies in various stages of decomposition, emaciated and skeletal. Many had been cannibalized. The stench was so odious it muddled the brain. The Americans shared the same eerie thought: these people are not victims of war. Something worse has done this. The GIs, most of them young kids away from home for the first time, wept openly, not understanding what they were confronting. A few soldiers cursed. The rest stood frozen in stunned silence.

Soldiers watched as Dachau prisoners staggered forward. The healthier prisoners ran at them waving and screaming. The others limped and crawled, reaching out to their liberators' feet, crying, touching. Inside a brick crematorium, the Americans discovered piles of human ashes and bones. In a separate building in the woods, they found a torture chamber filled with 1,200 contorted corpses, some hanging from meat hooks that lined the walls. Near the crematorium, they stared at a six-foot-high wall pockmarked with bullet holes. The ground beneath their feet was stained deep red.

Inside the officers' kitchen, soldiers found a lone German Storm Trooper eating a plate of beans.

"How could you do these things?" an American whispered, pointing out the window to the camp.

The German shrugged. "Those human swine..."

He was holding a spoonful of beans when they shot him.

On the roll-call square, an American chaplain with a silver cross on his helmet climbed atop a jeep. Prisoners shuffled forward and quickly filled the square.

“We must thank the Lord,” the chaplain said and offered prayers in Latin. Some prisoners knelt, some wept, some made the sign of the Cross. Most were too traumatized to do anything but stare.

Another soldier climbed up next to the chaplain. “Last night, Mussolini lynched!” he said in broken German. “Munich taken! You are all free! I salute you in the name of the United Nations!” Prisoners raised their skinny arms and cheered as best they could.

Nobody slept that night. The camp was alive with bonfires. A few former prisoners sang songs. Others cooked Army food over makeshift fires. Many wondered where they would go. They had no home, no family. “When the liberation came,” one former victim said, “that’s when I knew our real troubles were starting.”

On all sides and throughout the night, hundreds more died—having lived through the unbelievable just long enough to be free.

Two months later, in July 1945, 32-year-old William Denson stared at the evidence of what had occurred in Dachau and also found it unbelievable. Doctors dissecting people for practice without anesthetic, old people crushed in cement mixers, starvation, torture, the systematic slaughter of more than 100,000 men and women and children—who could believe such things? Having grown up in Alabama in the 1920s, the Harvard-educated prosecutor was not naïve about how brutal one race of people could be to another. Still, lynching and torture were exceptions to human behavior, not the rule described by evidence from Dachau.

For Denson, a devout Presbyterian, inhumanity on such a scale defied every instinct he had cultivated since childhood. Now the Army had appointed him chief prosecutor in upcoming trials of those who had run Hitler’s camps. If he could not believe the extent of what they had done, how could he convince a tribunal?

Even survivors agreed with him. “I was there,” said former prisoner Athur Haulot “and I even don’t believe it.” Haulot was among hundreds of potential witnesses for the prosecution.

“Was there anything worse than the beatings?” Denson asked. “Was there anything harder on the prisoners?” He needed to know, not only to overcome his own disbelief but to see if Haulot would come off as credible in court.

Haulot thought back on his three years in Dachau. “The worst was not that I was beaten but that I was forced to respect people who were criminals,” referring to Dachau guards and officers. The loss of self-respect reached such a point, Haulot said, that one day he stole bread

from a fellow prisoner. “That I, who had a decent upbringing, should fall so low—” his voice choked up and tears came.

“I knew many people who died in Block 25, not because they were beaten or starved, but because they’d had enough. Up to the neck,” he said and drew an imaginary line across his throat. A few weeks later, Haulot recounted his story before the tribunal. The courtroom was so silent “you could hear a pin drop,” Denson recalled. Haulot was one of 170 witnesses called to testify in the first Dachau trial.

After that came a second trial: operators of camp Mauthausen. U.S. Navy lieutenant commander Jack Taylor had been a prisoner there for the five months leading up to liberation.

“How many different forms of killing did you come in contact with in Mauthausen,” Denson asked his witness on the stand.

“Gassing,” Taylor said, “hanging, shooting. There was a group of Dutch Jews who were beaten so badly they jumped over a cliff into the stone quarry. There was death from exposure to the cold, people clubbed to death with axes or hammers, torn to pieces by dogs, injection into the heart with magnesium chloride or benzene, whipped with a cow tail until the flesh tore away, buried alive, red-hot poker down the throat...”

On the bedside table of his room in Munich, seven miles from the courthouse, Denson kept his childhood King James Bible. As a young boy, each time he memorized a verse, Denson’s father wrote its chapter and number on the book’s end pages. By the time Denson was 15, the end pages were crammed with more than one hundred notations. The world of Christian charity and goodness described by those passages seemed far away from the monstrous universe of Hitler’s camps.

It took him two years, but William Denson eventually won convictions against 177 men and one woman responsible for atrocities committed inside camps Dachau, Mauthausen, Flossenburg, and Buchenwald. Half of them were hanged. The rest were eventually set free in clemency measures meant to encourage Germany’s support against the Soviet Union. Denson went back to America and became deacon of his church on Long Island. For nearly 50 years, he never told anyone about the horrors he had known in the Dachau courtroom, not even his wife. He kept those nightmares to himself.

Time passed. Reading about atrocities in Cambodia and Rwanda and the Sudan, Denson shook his head and wondered at how little the world had learned. Starting in the early 1990s, he

began to speak publicly about what he had seen and done a half-century before. He drew large crowds to gatherings at law schools and spoke to packed halls at Holocaust memorials. No one breathed during his presentation. During one such session at Drew University in June 1997, a hand went up. “What do you tell people,” a student asked, “who say the Holocaust is just unbelievable, that it never happened?”

“I tell them they’re right about the unbelievable part,” Denson replied. “But it did happen, all of it. I saw such things—‘man’s inhumanity to man’ doesn’t even begin to describe it,” and he hit the podium again and again, imitating the rhythm of a whip.

He grew thoughtful, remembering, then looked out at his young audience. “This is your job, as it was mine, to tell the would-be Hitlers of the world that if they flaunt the law they will be hunted down, they will be captured, and they will be punished.”

It was an energetic display from the 84-year-old man of God. He grew quiet for a moment, then concluded his talk on a note as personal as a page from a diary.

“I took no pride in having prosecuted 177 people,” he said. “I took no pride in seeing so many of them hang.” They were criminals, he said. That was his job, legally, morally, and spiritually.

“What does bring a touch of pride to my heart is when one of the survivors comes up to me and says, ‘Thank you for what you’ve done,’ for proving the unbelievable true.

“That I’m proud of.”

Joshua M. Greene, author of *Justice at Dachau: The Trials of an American Prosecutor*, writes about people of faith. His biography, *Here Comes The Sun: The Spiritual Journey of George Harrison*, was published in December by John Wiley & Sons.