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# Remembering The Liberation Of The Nazi Death Camps

by
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When the fortieth anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, the notorious Nazi concentration camp, was celebrated in East Germany earlier this month, not one speaker recalled the suffering of countless thousands of Jews who were among the 56,000 men, women and children who died there from July of 1937 to April of 1945. Similarly, nearly all mention of Nazi persecution of the Jews is said to have been all but obliterated from a museum located at the camp.

But according to a member of General George S. Patton's Third Army who participated in the liberation of the camp four decades ago, the world can ill afford to forget the atrocities perpertrated against these people. And while Robert Tighe, who served as a corporal in the Fourth Armored Division of the 51st Armored Infantry, claims that his experiences were neither extraordinary nor unique, he does agree that his story, and those of his comrades, deserve to be told and remembered. For without such personal testimony, he fears that those seeking to re-write history

may one day find denying the horrors of the Holocaust a far easier task.

Perhaps conscious effort won't be necessary to ameliorate the legacy of Hitler's Final Solution of the Jewish Question--pure human nature may take its toll, with succeeding generations absorbing less and less of what actually happened in the concentration camps, until the truth, like a piece of sea glass, becomes weathered, diminished, unrecognizable. Tighe, chairman of the English department at Canton High School for the past 29 years, claims this natural process may have already begun. Earlier this year, a high school senior asked him if he had ever been to Germany. Tighe replied affirmatively, though admitting that he hadn't cared for the experience terribly much. When asked to explain, the teacher responded that his feelings "probably had something to do with the fact that the Germans were shooting at me."

"They were shooting at you? What were they shooting at you for?" the student asked. "Because there was a war going on," he replied, somewhat taken aback. "They had a war in Germany?" was the student's astonished response.

Tighe, who lives with his wife and children in Mansfield, agrees that this one student may not be representative of all of today's youth, but he is afraid that our society may be failing to pass on the lessons learned from World War Two. "I really feel that I have a responsibility," he notes. "I really believe that this terrible thing shouldn't be forgotten. People should know about it, especially kids. They should learn what Nazism, bigotry and things like that can lead to."

What they did lead to in the 1930's and 40's was possibly one of the most systematic attempts to annhilate a people ever undertaken. Hitler had made it clear even before he assumed power that Jews would have no place in his Reich and not long after the Nazis took control of Germany in 1933, the persecution of this people, who by that time had been living in the country for over 1,600 years, began in earnest. To celebrate Hitler's political victory on January 30, Nazis carried out vicious attacks on Jews; by April, Jews had had most of their rights revoked, had been dismissed from positions of public office and had been expelled from the army. The Nuremburg Laws, established in September of 1935, officially revoked their citizenship. The year 1938 saw mass arrests and the forced registration of all Jews, a wave of oppression that culminated on November 9 and 10 with the infamous Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass,

when synagogues were once again the targets of violence, property was destroyed and 20,000 to 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and transported to concentration camps.

The camps had been established almost as soon as Hitler came to power, and by the end of 1933, 50 had been constructed and were being used to hold enemies of the Fuhrer in "protective custody." In reality, the Gestapo, or Secret Police, were using these facilities to terrorize real or perceived opponents of the Nazi regime. In June of 1934, however, Hitler's Schutzstaffel, or S.S., whose ranks were filled by the Nazi elite, were given control of the camps and in the years to follow, such names as Dachau, Buchenwald, Ravensbruck and Sachsenhausen would become synonymous with torture, humiliation and death.

In January of 1939, Hitler officially called for the "annihilation of the Jewish race throughout Europe" and Nazi planners calculated that this could mean the death of roughly 11 million people. By 1941, Hitler's Final Solution was underway and within a year, the network of concentration camps had spread to Eastern Europe, with the main extermination camps operating in Poland. With the proliferation of the camps came the increased use of inmates as a slave labor force; at Buchenwald, prisoners worked at the Gustloff armament works and were soon supplied to other local industries. Eventually, 133 satellite camps sprung up around Buchenwald.

Two years later, however, with the Nazi regime crumbling and American, Soviet and British forces making continued advances, the S.S. began evacuating those camps situated in occupied lands and consolidated prisoners at sites within the Reich, itself. As a result, the prisoner population at Buchenwald soared to a high of 89,143 in October of 1944, severely overcrowding the camp and creating conditions ripe for the spread of disease.

It was around this time that Tighe, a twenty-year-old corporal who had been born and raised in Lowell, had sailed across the Atlantic aboard the Queen Elizabeth, which had been specially fitted to serve as a troop ship. Joining up with his unit near Metz on the French/German border, Tighe found himself and the rest of Patton's Third Army racing to the rescue of the 101st Airborne Division, which had been surrounded by the German Army in Bastogne, Belgium. His unit never reached the beleaguered troops, though another armored infantry division was able to save the men. After stops in Luxembourg and at the Siegfried Line on the Our River, Tighe's division entered the Rhineland and

and engaged in three bloody days of battle near Bitburg, where President Ronald Reagan is planning to visit a cemetary this month.

The division moved on, crossing the Rhine River and rushing for Gotha, where Hitler and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, commander of the German army in the west, were rumored to be meeting. While the pursuit proved fruitless, Tighe's division was drawn within the network of Buchenwald's subsidiary camps. While he notes that the existence of concentration camps was well known, Tighe stresses that the troops had no idea that they were being used to exterminate the Jews and other "undesirables."

"We knew that Hitler had blamed all of Germany's troubles on the Jews," he explains, "so we knew that the Jews were being put in the camps. But we had no idea--and I don't know of anybody else who had any idea--about the Final Solution."

"As soon as we saw Ohrdruf," Tighe interjects, "we knew that (the camps) were more than just jails."

Ohrdruf, Tighe was to learn firsthand, was one of Buchenwald's satellite camps, and on their way from Gotha to Buchenwald, his unit had unwittingly chosen the town in which the camp was located to sleep for the night. The troops dug in on the side of a hill, and since it was such a warm evening, Tighe and a friend, who happened to have been a butcher before the war, went searching for livestock. "We used to shoot cows and he'd butcher them for us," he says of his companion. "We had these K-rations but whenever you had the chance, you wanted to see if you could get some eggs or chicken."

So around 6 p.m., the pair set off in the receding daylight, trudging through woods until they came upon Ohrdruf and its rows of barracks. "We thought they were chicken coops," he notes, but soon after entering the camp from the rear, the soldiers quickly learned differently. "When we got into one of them, they were obviously not chicken coops," Tighe recalls. "They were barracks, and they were empty. And they were strange barracks--we had double bunks in our country but these just had shelves, really, and each shelf was only about a foot apart."

Not only was the architecture odd but the camp reeked with a strong, foreign odor. "There was a terrible smell, but a smell we got to know about," Tighe comments, referring to the stench of burned flesh. "And not only that, there was defecation and all sorts of stuff around. It was a filthy mess." Making their way through the camp, the pair discovered a shed, roughly 10 feet in height, that contained naked corpses staked one atop the other. "They were all absolutely emaciated," he says. "You could take your hand and go like that"-- he makes a

narrow circle with his thumbs and index fingers--"right around some of them." Next to the bodies, which he said were sprinkled with some sort of white powder, was a large furnace.

"I have to confess," he says, "I didn't make the connection. I just thought the furnace was the central heating for the camp. It was very much like the furnaces we had growing up in our schools." Continuing through the camp, Tighe came upon yet another gruesome sight--in a courtyard just inside the main gate, roughly twenty clothed prisoners, among them an American pilot still wearing his flight jacket, were lying on the ground. The prisoners, who he guessed had been shot only recently, were Jews, easily identifiable in their blue and white striped uniforms with a yellow Star of David sewn onto each one. Gaping at the dead bodies, Tighe's companion turned to him and announced "I'm never going to take another prisoner."

Franklin M. Davis, Jr., writing in Across the Rhine, noted that when General Dwight Eisenhower, then the Supreme Allied Commander, visited Ohrdruf, he immediately rushed back to Third Army headquarters to radio London and Washington and ask that legislators and journalists be brought to the camp to witness the gruesome sight for themselves. General Patton's reaction to the concentration camp was reportedly far more rudimentary--Old Blood and Guts simply vomited. And after being forced to tour the camp with their townspeople, the mayor of Ohrdruf and his wife hanged themselves.

"When I saw those bodies, the ones that were shot down," Tighe notes, "I remember vividly the thought that came to me: humans did this, and the thought that I was a human being, too, and probably under certain circumstances I could act this way...that's what I found frightening, that I could do something like that. Because they were only ordinary people who did this--they didn't have horns or tails or anything like that."

The road back to their unit was strewn with ashes and human remains--Tighe admitted that the realization that the Nazis had been cremating the bodies hit him only then. "It suddenly dawned on me that they'd been burning them," he notes. "I didn't know anything about trying to eliminate (the Jews), I just thought there must have been disease and they were burning up these bodies to prevent the spread... . But nevertheless, I thought it was horrible that they would leave these...pieces...along the side of the road."

Their return to the unit sent many more men down to the camp to investigate

but Tighe says he never returned. As for stories he has heard regarding survivors of Ohrdruf, Tighe can offer no explanation. "There was nobody there when I was there, and as far as I know, ours was the first division to go through there. It was absolutely empty and the silence was deafening."

The unit pushed on the next morning, and within a day or two arrived at Buchenwald. As it had been for some time, the weather was nice that afternoon of April 11, 1945, and Tighe was riding atop a half-track truck. "We weren't paying any attention. It was a pleasant ride, no war, no fighting...and all of a sudden the column stopped. I looked up and there was a camp--barbed wire and buildings--pretty much like Ohrdruf. We were at the back, I think--there was no gate. It was just a fence, and on the other side of the fence there were these barracks...and this tank was running up against the fence, then backing off and then running back into the fence. And in the meantime, all these people were pouring out of the barracks."

Tighe notes that while the line of vehicles were waiting to drive into the camp, a moan was plainly audible, a low, plaintive wailing emanating from the sick and injured. When the tank finally broke through and moved into the courtyard, Tighe says that the moan was drowned out by a swirling "babble" of inmates shouting in various languages, none of which he could identify. The column of trucks came to a halt inside the camp and "these people were surging around us. They were all emaciated--some of them looked fairly good, but most of them were terribly emaciated. Some were even dragging themselves along the ground toward us."

"They were all grabbing us," Tighe continues, "but this one guy got a hold of my foot--I had a combat boot on--and he started kissing my foot. I found that awfully disconcerting, because I didn't know what to do--I didn't want him kissing my foot, that didn't seem right, but on the other hand, I didn't want to pull my foot away because these people were all dirty...and I didn't want them to think I didn't want anything to do with them." The half-track driver soon drove off, however, and pulled Tighe away with him.

Because of the wide area that the camp covered, Tighe admits that it is quite likely that his unit was only one of a handful that actually liberated the camp. Technically, the inmates had freed themselves from captivity earlier in the day, when they had set upon the fleeing camp adminstration with weapons

stored over a long period of time by a camp resistance movement. That the prisoners could muster the strength to overcome their guards was impressive, in that the Germans had not dispensed food for six days.

Tighe notes that he and his fellow soldiers began handing out their cigarettes and food rations to the prisoners, generosity that he came to learn had resulted in severe cases of food poisoning. Deprived of a normal intake of nutrients, the inmates were unable to digest these and other provisions secured in raids on camp stocks because of the high fat and protein content. Elie Wiesel, the prominent writer and chronicler of the Holocaust, was among those who fell ill from food poisoning at Buchenwald and lapsed into a coma. He would later say, however, that the American liberators "gave us back our lives. What I felt for them then nourishes me to the end of my days... ."

That evening, while parked along the side of a road near the camp, the troops watched as freed inmates ran through the nearby town, looting homes and setting them on fire. "I could hear that noise (the low moan) again and you could hear them looting and you could see the fires in the darkness," Tighe recalls. "I remember we talked about what we should do and one fellow said, "Let them burn the ---- place down." A search for an enemy bazooka man soon after led his unit out of the area.

Of the two camps, Tighe said that Buchenwald was easier to handle.. It had none of the piled corpses of Ohrdruf, at least from what he could see from his perch on the half-track. "The worst thing I saw was people dragging themselves along. But everyone I saw was still alive. I didn't see any dead bodies stacked up, I didn't seen any ashes--I didn't see anybody that had been shot down (as at Ohrdruf.)" In this respect, Tighe was apparently lucky, since other parts of Buchenwald apparently rivaled Ohrdruf and trucks were used to haul the corspes away.

As for processing what he had seen, Tighe admits that he was somewhat numbed. "There was no big psychological burden," he says. "It was terrible, (but) there were so many terrible incidents that they sort of desensitized me. Of course, this was different from just another soldier getting killed--this was the product of bigotry, really."

When asked whether he continues to harbor resentment for the Germans in light of the atrocities that he witnessed, Tighe confesses that "every so often" hatred wells up inside of him. "I try not to (feel this way)," he quickly adds, " because I don't believe in bigotry and I don't believe in condemning whole races and nations. But every so often I get that feeling; it comes back

and I fight it away."

Still, Tighe does not advocate continuing "a vendetta against the German people ad infinitum... . But there are some things that you just can't put behind. You can put the war behind you, you can put the deaths of a lot of American boys and a lot of German boys behind, but you can't put Nazism behind and you can't put the bigotry that went with Nazism and the concentration camps that resulted from that bigotry behind. Those are things you can't put behind you."