

The Ultimate Blasphemy

As the aircraft landed on the hastily repaired strip – a ‘Jock’ (Scottish) doctor raced up to us in his jeep.

“Got any medical orderlies?” he shouted above the roar of the aircraft engines. “Any K rations or vitaminised chocolate?”

“What’s up? I asked for I could see that his face was grey with shock.

“Concentration camp up the road,” he said shakily, lighting a cigarette. “It’s dreadful – just dreadful. He threw the cigarette away untouched. “I’ve never seen anything so awful in my life. You just won’t believe it ‘til you see it – for God’s sake come and help them!”

These are the words of comedian, Michael Bentine on first hearing about Belsen – an RAF intelligence officer with MI9, he was one of the early liberators and described it later as the '*ultimate blasphemy*'. Twenty-nine years after its liberation I visited Bergen Belsen. I was twelve and it changed the way I saw the world.

Today it is a peaceful, open park some fourteen hundred by four hundred metres; a monument, and it is quite impossible to imagine how it must have been as a camp. But you cannot escape the price paid by the minority groups who were herded there to die in conditions of inconceivable horror, for as you look around you see grassy mounds, mostly rectangular in shape and quite huge, each having a stone monument stating in German, *Hier Ruhen 2500 Tote* (Here lie 2500 Dead) - the number differs from one mound to another, but all contain a staggering quantity of bodies.

It is a quiet place, but despite the area being surrounded by forest, I remember no bird song. But, it is also a very loud place: the burial mounds in their size and simplicity and the few stark words describing them cry out across the years. You never forget visiting a place such as this and having done so, I knew I needed to find out more.

Back then I knew next to nothing about the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Nazi regime and was staggered to learn of some of what they did. In two and half years between 1943 and 1945 five million Hungarians, Poles, Russians, Gypsies, homosexuals, disabled people, and those considered ‘Untermenschen’ (subhumans); and six million Jews were murdered in the execution of the ‘final solution’. Given the sheer numbers involved it is hardly surprising that as Germany imploded the crimes became impossible to hide and on 15th April 1945 when the British troops entered Belsen they found more than 13,000 unburied bodies and some 60,000 emaciated, diseased people in a camp originally designed to house no more than 10,000. No one who witnessed this was left unmoved and for many ordinary soldiers, who had slogged and fought their way from the beaches of Normandy to this awful place, it gave an unambiguous reason as to why they had gone to war.

Brigadier Glyn Hughes, Vice Director of Medical Services for the British Army of the Rhine was in charge of managing the medical needs and organisation of the camp in the immediate days following its liberation. During the 1st Belsen trial, he was a key witness for the prosecution and when asked whether he had witnessed anything like Belsen before, replied:

I have been a doctor for 30 years and have seen all the horrors of war, but I have never seen anything to touch it.'

Reading many of the transcripts of the trials of Belsen, I still find it almost impossible to imagine what it must have been like. The details these documents contain are so shocking and sickening that they belie the reality of the world in which most of us live. When Belsen was liberated, 70% of the inmates needed urgent medical care. To facilitate this a DP (displaced

persons) camp was set up nearby and medical people drafted in to look after the sick and dying. Among them were 96 student volunteers from London teaching hospitals, and it was their intervention that was credited with vastly reducing the casualty rate. Sadly in the months following liberation and despite all efforts, more than 13,000 victims died.

The main problem was getting food into starving people. Three diets were tried and in the end, a Bengali Famine mix, which had been used successfully during that country's highly controversial famine in 1943, proved to have some effect and people began to recover. There are conflicting reports about the effectiveness of this mixture, which was made up of powdered milk, flour and lots of sugar, but as it was sickly sweet many patients found it quite unpalatable. As most of the inmates were from Eastern Europe they preferred a more acidic, vinegar and spiced diet, so to make the mix more palatable, paprika was added, which seems to have had a positive effect. Reading the evidence accounts, it seems to me that the recovery was a mixture of medical care, other rations, clean water to drink and 'hope'. For those too weak to eat, intravenous feeding was attempted but as many prisoners had been murdered by SS doctors using injections of benzol and creosote, at the sight of the feeding equipment, these people became hysterical.

So how did Belsen become the infamous symbol of this Nazi genocide? Following the invasion of Poland in 1939 the barracks at Belsen, which had previously been a camp for workers constructing the military base nearby, were turned into a POW camp. The camp grew following the invasion of Russia, and at its peak housed over 100,000 prisoners in 3 Stalags. These Stalags were run by the Wehrmacht (regular German army), and the thousands of prisoners housed there were harshly treated: by war's end, some 50,000 Russian POWs had died there.

In 1943 part of the camp was taken over by the SS department, euphemistically called, 'the Economic-Administration Main Office' and became part of the concentration camp system. It was designated a civilian internment camp and initially housed Jewish prisoners intended for exchange with German interns from other countries, and for hard cash.

The SS sub-divided the camp into smaller units for individual groups: The Hungarian camp, The Special camp - for Polish Jews; the Neutrals camp, and the Star camp - for Dutch Jews. That summer and now in full operation, some 14,600 Jews, including nearly 3,000 children, were brought in. Most of these people were set to work, the majority salvaging usable leather pieces from shoes brought in from all over Germany and occupied countries. By concentration camp standards, many of these prisoners were less harshly treated due to their perceived transfer value, but in reality, only some 2500 Jews were ever released from the concentration camp system.

By March 1944 Belsen was re-designated as a 'recovery' camp and under the plan that they would return to their former places once better, housed prisoners from other camps too sick to work. Naturally, they weren't given any medical treatment and so very few ever returned, most dying from disease, starvation and exhaustion.

In August 1944, the now famous, Women's camp was formed. The first inmates came from the Warsaw Ghetto. The most famous inmate of this camp was Anne Frank who, together with her sister Margot, were sent there from Auschwitz. They died in March 1945 probably from typhus.

At no time was Belsen designated a death camp in the way of Auschwitz, but many inmates were sent there from Belsen for immediate execution and cremation. After transfer from Auschwitz, the new commandant, Josef Kramer, began his tenure in December 1944. It was during this time that the camp unravelled as it took in tens of thousands of prisoners from the east, transferred away from the advancing Russian army.

On 5th February 1945, lice-infested Hungarian prisoners from the east brought with them Typhus, which then raged through the camp decimating the already weak and sick.

It was this virulent outbreak, together with the infestation of lice and the sea of filth that enveloped this wretched place that led the liberating-authorities to order Belsen's destruction by fire, which was carried out in June 1945. Flame-throwing 'Bren Gun' Carriers and Churchill Crocodile tanks laid waste: a befitting end to 'hell-on-earth'. Flying overhead that day was comedian Michael Bentine on his way to Denmark with pilot, Kelly, who remarked on seeing the flames and destruction: '*Thank Christ for that.*' Bentine said that Kelly's words sounded like a benediction.

Thanks to the No. 5 Army Film and Photographic Unit, the liberation and conditions of the camp were recorded. They have been shown all over the world making Belsen a synonym for Nazi war crimes.

In the aftermath, former officers and guards were rounded up and put on trial. In all there were three Belsen trials, the first lasted 54 days and prosecuted 45 individuals including Commandant, Josef Kramer. At its conclusion, 11 were hanged; a few were acquitted and the others sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from one year to life. But by June 1955 through pleas for clemency and appeals, all of those imprisoned had been released. Only one trial was ever held in a German court, which ended in acquittal. Over 200 other named SS personnel known to have been at Belsen never stood trial. Despite the fact that the Nuremberg trials found that the actions of the Wehrmacht in the treatment of Russian POWs constituted a war crime, there have never been any trials for those atrocities.

For years after her death, Nazis sympathisers declared that Anne Frank never existed and that her diary was a fake. The famous Nazi hunter, Simon Wiesenthal, was challenged to track down her arresting officer, Karl Silberbauer, which he did in 1963. Silberbauer was shown a photograph of Anne and confirmed her identity. On the death of Anne's father, Otto, in 1980, her papers and diary were bequeathed to the Dutch Institute of War Documentation who ordered a full forensic examination. In 1986 they were satisfied and the documents declared genuine.

An entry from her diary foretells a future still tarnished by the hatred, intolerance and violence of mankind: dated 3rd May 1944, she wrote:

"There's in people simply an urge to destroy, an urge to kill, to murder and rage, and until all mankind, without exception, undergoes a great change, wars will be waged, everything that has been built up, cultivated, and grown will be destroyed and disfigured, after which mankind will have to begin all over again."

© 2020 Tim Wickenden – Written to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the liberation by British and Canadian Troops on the afternoon of Sunday, April 15th 1945

There is a wealth of information about Bergen Belsen – the Imperial War Museum archive is a good place to start and can be found at <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-liberation-of-bergen-belsen> and is the source of some of the photographs below.

Belsen Today





Belsen photographs taken following liberation – courtesy of the Imperial War Museum