

Dachau 1945: The Souls of All Are Aflame

In 1945, a Paschal Liturgy like no other was performed. Just days after their liberation by the US military on April 29, 1945, hundreds of Orthodox Christian prisoners at the Dachau concentration camp gathered to celebrate the Resurrection service and to give thanks.

by Douglas Cramer

The Dachau concentration camp was opened in 1933 in a former gunpowder factory. The first

prisoners interred there were political opponents of Adolf Hitler, who had become German chancellor that same year. During the twelve years of the camp's existence, over 200,000 prisoners were brought there. The majority of prisoners at Dachau were Christians, including Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox clergy and lay people.

Countless prisoners died at Dachau, and hundreds were forced to participate in the cruel medical experiments conducted by Dr. Sigmund Rascher. When prisoners arrived at the camp they were beaten, insulted, shorn of their hair, and had all their belongings taken from them. The SS guards could kill whenever they thought it was appropriate. Punishments included being hung on hooks for hours, high enough that heels did not touch the ground; being stretched on trestles; being whipped with soaked leather whips; and being placed in solitary confinement for days on end in rooms too small to lie down in.

The abuse of the prisoners reached its end in the spring of 1945. The events of that Holy Week were later recorded by one of the prisoners, Gleb Rahr. Rahr grew up in Latvia and fled with his family to Nazi Germany when the Russians invaded. He was arrested by the Gestapo because of his membership in an organization that opposed both fascism and communism. Originally imprisoned in Buchenwald, he was transported to Dachau near the end of the war.

In fact, Rahr was one of the survivors of the infamous "death trains," as they were called by the American G.I.'s who discovered them. Thousands of prisoners from different camps had been sent to Dachau in open rail cars. The



vast majority of them died horrific deaths from starvation, dehydration, exposure, sickness, and execution.

In a letter to his parents the day after the liberation, G.I. William Cowling wrote, "As we crossed the track and looked back into the cars the most horrible sight I have ever seen met my eyes. The cars were loaded with dead bodies. Most of them were naked and all of them skin and bones. Honest their legs and arms were only a couple of inches around and they had no buttocks at all. Many of the bodies had bullet holes in the back of their heads."

Marcus Smith, one of the US Army personnel assigned to Dachau, also described the scene in his 1972 book, *The Harrowing of Hell*.

Refuse and excrement are spread over the cars and grounds. More of the dead lie near piles of clothing, shoes, and trash. Apparently some had crawled or fallen out of the cars when the doors were opened, and died on the grounds. One of our men counts the boxcars and says that there are thirty-nine. Later I hear that there were fifty, that the train had arrived at the camp during the evening of April 27, by which time all of the passengers were supposed to be dead so that the bodies could be disposed of in the camp crematorium. But this could not be done because there was no more coal to stoke the furnaces. Mutilated bodies of German soldiers are also on the ground, and occasionally we see an inmate scream at the body of his former tormentor and kick it. Retribution!



Rahr was one of the over 4,000 Russian prisoners at Dachau at the time of the liberation. The liberated prisoners also included over 1,200 Christian clergymen. After the war, Rahr immigrated to the United States, where he taught Russian History at the University of Maryland. He later worked for Radio Free Europe. His account of the events at Dachau in 1945 begins with his arrival at the camp:

April 27th: The last transport of prisoners arrives from Buchenwald. Of the 5,000 originally destined for Dachau, I was among the 1,300 who had survived the trip. Many were

shot, some starved to death, while others died of typhus. . . .

April 28th: I and my fellow prisoners can hear the bombardment of Munich taking place some 30 km from our concentration camp. As the sound of artillery approaches ever nearer from the west and the north, orders are given proscribing prisoners from leaving their barracks under any circumstances. SS-soldiers patrol the camp on

motorcycles as machine guns are directed at us from the watch-towers, which surround the camp.

April 29th: The booming sound of artillery has been joined by the staccato bursts of machine gun fire. Shells whistle over the camp from all directions. Suddenly white flags appear on the towers—a sign of hope that the SS would surrender rather than shoot all prisoners and fight to the last man. Then, at about 6:00 p.m., a strange sound can be detected emanating from somewhere near the camp gate which swiftly increases in volume. . . .

The sound came from the dawning recognition of freedom. Lt. Col. Walter Fellenz of the US Seventh Army described the greeting from his point of view:

Several hundred yards inside the main gate, we encountered the concentration enclosure, itself. There before us, behind an electrically charged, barbed wire fence, stood a mass of cheering, half-mad men, women and children, waving and shouting with happiness—their liberators had come! The noise was beyond comprehension! Every individual (over 32,000) who could utter a sound, was cheering. Our hearts wept as we saw the tears of happiness fall from their cheeks.

Rahr's account continues:

Finally all 32,600 prisoners join in the cry as the first American soldiers appear just behind the wire fence of the camp. After a short while electric power is turned off, the gates open and the American G.I.'s make their entrance. As they stare wide-eyed at our lot, half-starved as we are and suffering from typhus and dysentery, they appear more like fifteen-year-old boys than battle-weary soldiers. . . .

An international committee of prisoners is formed to take over the administration of the camp. Food from SS stores is put at the disposal of the camp kitchen. A US military unit also contributes some provision, thereby providing me with my first opportunity to taste American corn. By order of an American officer radio-receivers are confiscated from prominent Nazis in the town of Dachau and distributed to the various national groups of prisoners. The news comes in: Hitler has committed suicide, the Russians have taken Berlin, and German troops have surrendered in the South and in the North. But the fighting still rages in Austria and Czechoslovakia....

Naturally, I was ever cognizant of the fact that these momentous events were unfolding during Holy Week. But how could we mark it, other than through our silent, individual prayers? A fellow-prisoner and chief interpreter of the International Prisoner's Committee, Boris F., paid a visit to my typhus-infested barrack—"Block 27"—to inform me that efforts were underway in conjunction with the Yugoslav and Greek National Prisoner's Committees to arrange an Orthodox service for Easter day, May 6th.

There were Orthodox priests, deacons, and a group of monks from Mount Athos among the prisoners. But there were no vestments, no

books whatsoever, no icons, no candles, no prosphoras, no wine. . . . Efforts to acquire all these items from the Russian church in Munich failed, as the Americans just could not locate anyone from that parish in the devastated city. Nevertheless, some of the problems could be solved. The approximately four hundred Catholic priests detained in Dachau had been allowed to remain together in one barrack and recite mass every morning before going to work. They offered us Orthodox the use of their prayer room in "Block 26," which was just across the road from my own "block."

The chapel was bare, save for a wooden table and a Czenstochowa icon of the Theotokos hanging on the wall above the table—an icon which had originated in Constantinople and was later brought to Belz in Galicia, where it was subsequently taken from the Orthodox by a Polish king. When the Russian Army drove Napoleon's troops from Czenstochowa, however, the abbot of the Czenstochowa Monastery gave a copy of the icon to czar Alexander I, who placed it in the Kazan Cathedral in Saint-Petersburg where it was venerated until the Bolshevik seizure of power. A creative solution to the problem of the vestments was also found. New linen towels were taken from the hospital of our former SS-guards. When sewn together lengthwise, two towels formed an epitrichilion and when sewn together at the ends they became an orarion. Red crosses, originally intended to be worn by the medical personnel of the SS guards, were put on the towel-vestments.

On Easter Sunday, May 6th (April 23rd according to the Church calendar)—which ominously fell that year on Saint George the Victory-Bearer's Day—Serbs, Greeks and Russians gathered at the Catholic priests' barracks. Although Russians comprised about 40 percent of the Dachau inmates, only a few managed to attend the service. By that time "repatriation officers" of the special Smersh units had arrived in Dachau by American military planes, and begun the process of erecting new lines of barbed wire for the purpose of isolating Soviet citizens from the rest of the prisoners, which was the first step in preparing them for their eventual forced repatriation.

In the entire history of the Orthodox Church there has probably never been an Easter service like the one at Dachau in 1945. Greek and Serbian priests together with a Serbian deacon wore the make-shift "vestments" over their blue and gray-striped prisoner's uniforms. Then they began to chant, changing from Greek to Slavonic, and then back again to Greek. The Easter Canon, the Easter Sticheras—everything was recited from memory. The Gospel—"In the beginning was the Word"—also from memory.

And finally, the Homily of Saint John Chrysostom—also from memory. A young Greek monk from the Holy Mountain stood up in front of us and recited it with such infectious enthusiasm that we shall never forget him as long as we live. Saint John Chrysostomos himself seemed to speak through him to us and to the rest of the world as well! Eighteen Orthodox priests and one deacon—most of whom were Serbs—participated in this unforgettable service. Like the sick man

who had been lowered through the roof of a house and placed in front of the feet of Christ the Savior, the Greek Archimandrite Meletios was carried on a stretcher into the chapel, where he remained prostrate for the duration of the service.

Other prisoners at Dachau included the recently canonized Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, who later became the first administrator of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the US and Canada; and the Very Reverend Archimandrite Dionysios, who after the war was made Metropolitan of Trikkis and Stagnon in Greece.

Fr. Dionysios had been arrested in 1942 for giving asylum to an English officer fleeing the Nazis. He was tortured for not revealing the names of others involved in aiding Allied soldiers and was then imprisoned for eighteen months in Thessalonica before being transferred to Dachau. During his two years at Dachau, he witnessed Nazi atrocities and suffered greatly himself. He recorded many harrowing experiences in his book *Ieroi Palmoi*. Among these were regular marches to the firing squad, where he would be spared at the last moment, ridiculed, and then returned to the destitution of the prisoners' block.

After the liberation, Fr. Dionysios helped the Allies to relocate former Dachau inmates and to bring some normalcy to their disrupted lives. Before his death, Metropolitan Dionysios returned to Dachau from Greece and celebrated the first peacetime Orthodox Liturgy there. Writing in 1949, Fr. Dionysios remembered Pascha 1945 in these words:

In the open air, behind the shanty, the Orthodox gather together, Greeks and Serbs. In the center, both priests, the Serb and the Greek. They aren't wearing golden vestments. They don't even have cassocks. No tapers, no service books in their hands. But now they don't need external, material lights to hymn the joy. The souls of all are aflame, swimming in light.

Blessed is our God. My little paper-bound New Testament has come into its glory. We chant "Christ is Risen" many times, and its echo reverberates everywhere and sanctifies this place.

Hitler's Germany, the tragic symbol of the world without Christ, no longer exists. And the hymn of the life of faith was going up from all the souls; the life that proceeds buoyantly toward the Crucified One of the verdant hill of Stein.

On April 29, 1995—the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Dachau—the Russian Orthodox Memorial Chapel of Dachau was consecrated. Dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ, the chapel holds an icon depicting angels opening the gates of the concentration camp and Christ Himself leading the prisoners to freedom. The simple wooden block conical architecture of the chapel is representative of the traditional funeral chapels of the Russian North. The sections of the chapel were constructed by experienced craftsmen in the Vladimir region of Russia, and assembled in Dachau by veterans of the Western Group of Russian Forces just before their departure from Germany in 1994. The priests who participated in the 1945 Paschal Liturgy are commemorated at

every service held in the chapel, along with all Orthodox Christians who lost their lives “at this place, or at another place of torture.”



Christ Opening the Gates of Dachau

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