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Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs

Sam Dann
Sam Dann, editor
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On April 29, 1945, the Seventh Army's 42nd Rainbow and 45th Thunderbolt divisions liberated Dachau concentration camp. This book compiles the personal accounts of some 60 officers and men of the 42nd, presenting the horror they witnessed, their responses to it, and how it shaped their later lives. Dann, the compiler-editor and himself a participant, notes that "never again" demands knowledge of what happened, the preservation of testimony and awareness of the insidious power of denial and revisionism. Above all, it demands active commitment. This book serves these imperatives.

Dann first presents the official (and somewhat impersonal) contemporary accounts of five senior officers and an observer, then the accounts of the 42nd division's official correspondents, and then those of some 40 other soldiers, mainly GIs in their twenties. Most of these were written later, many specially for this book. Predominant is numbed disbelief at the horror witnessed, disbelief so powerful that it often truncated memory; the totality but not the detail survived and with it the unanswerable question of why and how a nation could descend into such barbarism. Accounts of the challenges faced by rabbis and priests and stories from "behind the wire" round out the painful narrative.

Some 32,000 men and women prisoners representing over 30 nationalities were alive in Dachau on the day of liberation. Forty boxcars on the railroad that served the camp held more than 4,000 corpses, among which a single living man was found and saved.

Dann's G.I. respondents invariably describe themselves as ordinary men, and most of the prisoners whom they liberated would have characterized themselves in just the same way. Yet in the face of death, there are always those who display an indestructible courage and selflessness. At the risk of their lives, a clandestine group (the International Prisoners Committee) formed a secret parallel administration in Dacha
PETER SKINNER (September / October 1998)

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