

First German Prison Camp Holds Secrets of Nazi Regime

By Ginny Dumond

Though people of all nationalities now roam the grounds freely, it is nearly impossible to walk down the camp's gravel paths and not feel the ghosts of Dachau.

This pioneer of all German concentration camps is like nothing that can be read in a book or seen on a movie screen. It is an experience.

"It's heavy, very heavy here," said Jill Hoffman, Florida resident. "It's kind of worse than I expected. You go to a lot of museums and see pictures, but it's strange to know you're sitting where they sat and walking where they were walking."

Dachau opened March 22, 1933, under the guise of a work camp for Communists and other Social Democratic rebels. In fact, the words that adorn the iron gate at the camp's entrance read *ARBIET MACHT FREI*—Work makes freedom. Although it was not primarily an extermination camp, Dachau served as a model for camps like Auschwitz and Treblinka, which were set up for the purpose of mass execution.

Besides Jews and political prisoners, Dachau also came to hold gypsies, anti-Nazi clergymen, and others (such as journalists, activists, and students) who were against the regime. Later, homosexuals and "antisocials" were added to the prisoners there to lower morale and cause the outside world to see inhabitants as deserving of punishment.

"The Nazis had this idea of extermination through work," said David Durlbut, a Dachau volunteer. "This is where they could get rid of people and make a profit at the same time."

Hunger, arbitrary killings, illness, and mass execution as well as scientific experiments performed on prisoners resulted in the death of thousands, though that was not the primary purpose of the institution.

"The Nazis thought 'If I want to get rid of resistance and get rid of it forever, I have to kill it,'" Durlbut said. "And because of the forward movement of Nazi soldiers, there was never a shortage of workers."

"If I kill 50 today, 50 more will come in tomorrow' was what they thought."

According to statistics, the total number of prisoners killed at Dachau was 31,951. More than 206,000 prisoners were registered there. Of those, many who were too young or sick to work were sent to extermination camps.

"This 31,000 does not include the 6,000 Russian officers who were murdered there," Durlbut said. "The SS military didn't train on paper targets; they trained on real, living human targets."

By 1939, when World War II began, Dachau housed around 5,000 people, but when fighting increased, Hitler saw the need to expand.

"He knew he would have to lock up more people, so he expanded to 8,000," Durlbut said. "When the Americans liberated the camp in 1945, it was holding more than 30,000 people, an obvious overcrowding."

By 1940, the Dachau death toll continued to increase as did the number of inhabitants. To curtail the time and cost associated with cremating the dead and their belongings, incinerators were installed in 1942 in an area that came to be known as "barrack X." A gas chamber was also installed later, but was never used for mass exterminations.

"But the chamber was used by SS doctors who ran poisonous gas experiments on prisoners," Durlbut said.

Other such experiments included cold water tests, in which a prisoner was put outside in sub-zero temperatures and doused in cold water every half hour until death, and altitude experiments that took place in pressure chambers. Hundreds of people were killed at Dachau during such experiments, which were originated to help Nazi pilots in crisis situations.

Due to the continuing increase in population at the camp and the need for skilled laborers at different parts of the town and surrounding area, Dachau took on numerous sub-camps.

"At the end of the war Dachau had 69 sub-camps under its control, and there were another 30,000 people locked up in those," Durlbut said.

Kenneth McCaleb, World War II Prisoner of War, was held captive near Dachau and visited the camp in 1976 and said he remembers a Commandant from the German army shaking his head with tears in his eyes as he left.

"He said 'That was a shame of Germany. I'm sure a lot of good Germans have thought the same thing,'" McCaleb said.

One of the most dramatic symbols of World War II, Dachau now serves as a reminder to the world of the tragedy of war and the importance of knowledge.

"People ask me why I do this every day," Durlbut said. "It's because there is still hate and racism, and only when enough people know can we prevent it from happening again."