

Barbara Distel

The Dachau Concentration Camp after Liberation

With the opening of the new main exhibition on the history of the Dachau concentration camp on May 2, 2003, located in the rooms of the former maintenance building, the new lay-out of the Dachau Memorial Site reached its initial conclusion, 70 years after the original concentration camp was set up. Working together with survivors of the concentration camp, an expert advisory board, appointed by the Bavarian Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs, had elaborated in 1995-1996 a conception for a new large main exhibition and several smaller exhibitions with the purpose of replacing the first exhibition from 1965. Furthermore, the conception provided for extending the information resources on the grounds and relocating the visitors' entrance from east to west, leading through the original gate of the former concentration camp. The House of Bavarian History in Augsburg was assigned responsibility for coordinating the realization of the new conception. Along with the continuous work contributed by concentration camp survivors as well as representatives from the Dachau Memorial Site and the Bavarian Office for Civic Education, the expert advisory board accompanied the realization process for the full seven years.

The official opening of the new comprehensive exhibition – 70 years after the Dachau concentration camp was established and 58 years after US Army units liberated the survivors – marked an important new period for the Memorial Site. The postwar history of the site had increasingly attracted the interest of both the general public and historical research in the preceding years: how the responsible authorities dealt with the camp grounds after liberation, how the grounds were used for a variety of purposes, and how the survivors attempted to have a memorial site created there. As the decision was taken to realize a new conception in 1995, the Memorial Site could already look back on thirty years of existence. At this point in time, the places of remembrance on the former concentration camp site had already existed over twice as long as the camp itself.

The chronology of the site after the dramatic hours when over 30,000 concentration camp prisoners who had survived their ordeal were liberated by US Army units on April 29, 1945, can be divided into four different phases, each of varying duration.

1. Between liberation and beginning a new life

News of the catastrophic conditions that the American liberators found in the Dachau concentration camp on April 29, 1945, filmed by US war-reporters and the subject of press reports, was sent around the world. The name of Dachau subsequently became a synonym for crimes against humanity. It took three months, until the end of July 1945, before the last survivors were able to leave the camp grounds.

In this period, the American liberators were confronted with enormous problems: the dead had to be buried, the ill cared for, and the hungry provided for. The camp had to be placed immediately under quarantine due to the rampant typhus epidemic, which cost several thousands of prisoners their lives even after liberation. To contain the contagion danger, it was absolutely necessary to improve the catastrophic sanitary conditions in the overfilled barracks. Together with representatives from the individual nations, who had joined together to form an international committee, the Americans organized this transition from complete chaos to reasonably ordered civilian life and prepared the repatriation of the survivors. Jewish survivors whose families had been murdered and property and possessions stolen were against returning to their former native countries, above all those from Eastern Europe. They were placed in so-called displaced persons camps. After the SS guards had fled, Allied soldiers had taken charge of a great majority of the survivors from the subcamps at a variety of places along the routes of the death marches. Most of the subcamps had been disbanded a few days before liberation, and the prisoners driven southward by SS guards. The liberated prisoners were then taken to hospitals in the near vicinity or housed in other buildings. In Dachau, an International Information Office was set up, where survivors used the remaining preserved documents and file cards to attempt to find out and document the fate of the more than 200,000 prisoners of the Dachau camp.

2. Internment and American military court proceedings, 1945 to 1948

In July 1945, both the former prisoner camp and the SS camp grounds were converted into an internment camp under the administration of the American military. Initially, around 25,000 persons were committed and placed in different sections of the camp. These persons were divided into the following groups:

- Members of the SS and functionaries of the Nazi party and its affiliated organizations who were covered by the category of “automatic arrest”: they formed the largest group initially. The first of these prisoners were released at the beginning of 1946.
- Members of the Wehrmacht who were being held in a sectioned-off POW camp located in the former SS camp. The first releases here took place in 1946 as well; this camp was disbanded in 1947.
- From these two groups persons were selected who were suspected of involvement in war crimes and crimes against humanity. They were placed in a War Crimes Enclosure (closed-off area for suspected war criminals), where they either waited for trial or for extradition to other countries.

- Finally, in 1947, a transition camp was set up for civilian internees against whom no involvement in crimes could be proven. They went through the so-called de-Nazification proceedings, under the auspices of German arbitration tribunals. These tribunals were disbanded in 1948.

The first major military trial in Dachau began as early November 15, 1945, with 40 defendants facing charges based on crimes committed in the Dachau concentration camp. This trial became a model for those to follow (“parent case”). Upon its conclusion, 36 defendants were sentenced to death, 28 of whom were then executed in Landsberg prison. Further trials followed, dealing with not only with other crimes committed in the Dachau concentration camp and its subcamps, but also in the concentration camps of Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Mühldorf, Mittelbau-Dora, and Buchenwald. In addition to these crimes committed in concentration camps, trials were heard against members of the SS who had perpetrated crimes against Allied soldiers. Overall, 1,672 accused were brought to trial in 489 proceedings before American military courts. Death sentences were passed in 426 cases, although not all of these were then carried out, and there were 256 acquittals. At the beginning of the 1950s, as the policy of the Western Allies altered under the influence of the Cold War, prison sentences were reduced or waived.

3. The refugee camp and the struggle for establishing a memorial site, 1948 to 1965

In January 1948, the US authorities handed over the former prisoner camp to the Bavarian state government. The entire area of the SS camp as well as the entrance building, the camp prison and a wing of the maintenance building remained, however, under the control of the American military administration for a further 25 years. The Bavarian authorities immediately arranged for refugees and homeless persons to be accommodated in the barracks camp, which was first called the “former internment camp” and then later the “Dachau East residential settlement”. The settlement was extended considerably in the following decade. Industry, businesses, restaurants and bars, cinemas, a school and a kindergarten were all built. The water and power systems were repaired and renewed. With the exception of the adjacent crematorium area, which was surrounded by a wall and cared for as a memorial site always open to the public, nothing remained that recalled the concentration camp. In these years there was as good as no public interest in the history of the years between 1933 and 1945 and the fate of the victims of the National Socialist dictatorship in the environs of Dachau. The demand issued by the Dachau local council in 1955, namely that the crematorium be torn down in order to put an end to the “defamation of the Dachau area”, was not the only attempt to have the architectural remnants of the concentration camp removed. French concentration camp survivors lodged a protest with the Bavarian government against the already begun demolition of the guard towers. As the German federal government signed a supplementary agreement to the Paris Treaties in

September 1955, undertaking to preserve and care for the graves of Nazi regime victims, this at least ensured the continuing existence of the entire crematorium area. Responsibility for this area had already been transferred to the Bavarian Heritage Office in 1952.

From about 1948 onwards, the Cold War increasingly hindered ties between survivors in Eastern and Western Europe, ultimately making them virtually impossible. In Germany as well, the former victims of persecution organized themselves anew according to their respective political leanings. In this context, the re-founding of an International Committee for the survivors of the Dachau concentration camp, which had already existed as a secret group in the final phase before liberation, was the first important step on the difficult path to establishing a memorial site that was to conserve and pass on the legacy of all prisoners. The first task was to win over alliance partners for the purpose of convincing politicians and the public of the significance of this project. Beginning in 1959, a Bavarian trustee board comprising of representatives from public institutions and associations, the greater majority of whom were victims of persecution, actively campaigned on the side of the International Prisoners' Committee for establishing a memorial site. By 1960, as on the concentration camp grounds a Catholic chapel was built on the joint initiative of concentration camp survivors and the Munich bishop Johannes Neuhäusler and officially opened on the occasion of the Eucharistic World Congress with 50,000 participants from across the world, it was obvious that any continued neglect of this site of European history had become unacceptable. At first, in the same year, survivors presented a documentary exhibition in the rooms of the large crematorium. Next, in 1962, the Bavarian state government and the Comité International de Dachau signed an agreement of intent to create a memorial site on the grounds of the former prisoner camp and a large documentary exhibition in the former maintenance building. The barracks, which were either greatly altered after 1945 or had become dilapidated, were torn down after the last residents of the refugee camp had left. The first two barracks were reconstructed and the walls and guard towers repaired. As the original entrance building continued to remain in the hands of the American military administration, a provisional entrance was built in the eastern outward wall.

On May 9, 1965, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the concentration camp's liberation, the Memorial Site and the new documentary exhibition could be opened, with a large number of survivors from almost all countries of Europe in attendance. In 1967, with the Protestant Church of Reconciliation and a Jewish memorial, two further religious buildings were erected on the grounds of the former prisoner camp. The project initiated by the Dachau concentration camp survivors was brought to a conclusion with the unveiling of the memorial on the former roll-call area in 1968. The Comité International de Dachau had staged an international competition that was won by the Jewish sculptor Nandor Glid from Belgrade. Looking back, it has to be emphasized that the design and arrangement of the Dachau Memorial Site in the 1960s mirrored the views and interests of the

surviving prisoners, whose initiative and persistence was instrumental in realizing the project. The weighting accorded to the religious buildings erected on the Memorial Site, which originally went back to the ability of bishop Johannes Neuhäusler to assert his views, is an indication of this; the first section of the documentary exhibition on the formative history of the Third Reich, insisted on by the German survivors, is another. Personal biographies and the history of persecution suffered by individuals were, in contrast, not taken up as themes; indeed, giving prominence to individual fates was consciously avoided. It was the survivors' conviction that the Dachau Memorial Site was to be a collective memorial and testimony, one that should serve the commemoration of the victims and the enlightenment of following generations. Facts, data and documents dispersed across the whole world connected with the history of the concentration camp were collected with the assistance of the survivors and brought to Dachau.

4. The Memorial Site of the former Dachau concentration camp, 1965 to 1995. Three decades of fostering remembrance

The crimes committed on the camp groups continued to dominate the first decade after the opening of the Memorial Site in 1965, a decade that was formatively shaped by the active participation of persons personally affected by this history. Some 300,000 visitors came to the Memorial Site every year, the overwhelming majority – up to 75 per cent in some years – from abroad. The proportion of survivors and their relatives was still very high, the interest shown by the German public in contrast very low. Only a few school classes and youth groups visited the Memorial Site, even though in 1964 the Bavarian State Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs had issued a recommendation for graduating classes at Bavarian schools to visit a concentration camp memorial site located in Bavaria. Didactic conceptions and relevant civic education ideas were yet to play a role in this period.

The situation at the Dachau Memorial Site changed fundamentally between the years 1975 and 1985. This decade was characterized by a continuing dramatic rise in the annual number of visitors, witnessing a threefold increase, and with 900,000 visitors eventually even approached the one million mark. At the same time, a worldwide interest in the history of Nazi crimes against humanity was developing, and new memorial sites and research centers were founded in many countries. In Dachau, the number of German school classes and youth groups now increased disproportionately, the share of German visitors rising to almost 50 per cent of the total number. The same period also saw a greater interest in the life stories of the survivors. Teachers and pedagogues involved in youth and adult education increasingly turned to eyewitnesses. The Dachau Memorial Site, at the time one of the few places where the voices of the surviving victims were given a platform and listened to, became a location for encounters between the generations and for informing first hand on the fate of the prisoners. New historical questions, such as the fate of the previously “forgotten victims” of the Nazi

dictatorship like the Sinti and Roma, the Jehovah's Witness and homosexuals, attracted more attention. As in many places initiatives were launched for researching into local history between 1933 and 1945, the significance of the subcamps, set up in the final stage of the camp's history, became increasingly clear. Four decades after liberation, those Jewish survivors who had been sent to the Dachau subcamps towards the end of the war and subsequently immigrated to Israel after being liberated, declared themselves willing to return and enter into dialogue with young Germans for the first time.

The political changes triggered by the year 1989 also had an impact on the Dachau Memorial Site. In connection with a broad discussion on new conceptions for the concentration camp memorial sites located on the territory of the former GDR, the Federal Republic's responsibility for all memorial sites of National Socialist terror became an issue for the first time. As a result, the federal government contributed to meeting the costs for realizing the new Dachau Memorial Site.

After the iron curtain fell, the still surviving former prisoners who had lived behind it now began to make their presence felt in the West. Most of the survivors in the countries of the former Soviet Union had been deported to Germany as children or youths. After their return from the concentration camp in 1945, many were once more arrested, detained in camps, and subjected to forced labor. In old age most of them lived in bitter poverty and without adequate medical care. In the 1990s, they addressed their hopes for assistance and compensation for the suffering inflicted on them to the Federal Republic of Germany and, in many cases, directly to the memorial sites. At the same time, the survivors began to retrace the steps of their own personal history of persecution, submerged for so long, half a century later. In connection with the foundation set up in 2000 by the German federal government and industrial companies for compensating victims of forced labor in the Nazi state, which was to financially assist survivors chiefly from Eastern Europe, the Dachau Memorial Site also became a contact point for hundreds of potential claimants.

The annual number of visitors to the Dachau Memorial Site from all over the globe has remained constantly high. They are mainly young persons who come to the "learning and remembrance site Dachau" in the course of history or civic education programs. The necessity of providing more differentiated didactic conceptions becomes more prevalent as the number of contemporary witnesses decreases. "However," said a young theologian in 1998, "the fate of remembrance is not decided by the size of video and other archives, by the capacity of data mediums, but solely by the courage and persistence of those who have been reached by the message passed on by the witnesses and continue to live in this world."

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Im Auftrag des Comité International de Dachau

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