

Concentration Camp



By Dr. X

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In Germany the words 'protective custody' have a double meaning. Originally the term meant the incarceration of people who were threatened by others and who were guarded for their own safety so that they might be protected from their enemies. Now, however, men in protective custody are mostly those who are brought, for the 'protection of the people and the State,' into a concentration camp without hearing, without court sentence, without the possibility of redress, and for an indefinite time. Frequently people sentenced by a court are taken into protective custody by the Gestapo after serving their prison sentence, often directly from the prison gate. Such, for example, was the fate of Pastor Niemöller, who, after being released from prison, was taken into the camp Sachsenhausen near Oranienburg, the camp with which we shall be concerned here. He is in solitary confinement there, and I never saw him.

I was taken into protective custody in connection with the murder of the German attaché in Paris, Ernst vom Rath, by the seventeen-year-old Polish subject, Grynszpan, who had been expelled from Germany first and then had been ordered to leave France. I do not want to justify this political murder in any way, but I can understand it as the act of a hopelessly desperate person.

I do not understand, however, the attitude of Hitler and his followers in this matter. To atone for the Paris murder, the Nazis imposed a collective punishment upon all German subjects of Jewish origin. First they organized a 'spontaneous' outburst of popular rage on the eve of November 10, 1938, throughout Germany at almost the same hour, and everywhere by the same methods. Abuses and tortures, even manslaughter, destruction of Jewish shops and apartments, arson of synagogues with gasoline brought for the purpose—such was the program.

The destruction of valuable property, of irretrievable art treasures, as well as of valuable tapestries in Munich, of Rembrandt pictures in Hesse, was not enough. The decision was made to bring a great number of Jews into camps for protective custody. Rough estimate places the number of victims at about sixty thousand males. In the camp with which we are dealing there were probably about six to seven thousand men.

The arrests took place in various ways, partly through the S.A. or S.S., partly through uniformed police, partly through plain-clothes men or secret police. It was the latter in my case. There appeared suddenly at our door a group of three men in civilian clothes, identified by their badges as policemen, who took us away in a car after having established through questioning that we were 'non-Aryans.' They also arrested a gentleman who happened to be visiting us. They had no warrants, and declined to give any information about our further destiny; our families for

days were without any idea of what had happened to us. We were brought into the courtyard of the police headquarters, our names and addresses were taken down, and without any further hearing we were loaded into large trucks covered with canvas, in which benches had been placed. For the older people—and the majority were over fifty—a chair had been provided so that they might climb into the truck more easily. We mention this here especially because the treatment of the uniformed police in charge of the transportation differed pleasantly from the treatment we suffered in the camp at the hands of the S.S. The crowds in the streets took little notice of the police trucks driving in a row. Only a few urchins around the police headquarters greeted us with howling.

Our trip, full of suspense, took us past the baroque palace of Oranienburg, built at the time of Frederick the Great, through the sand of Brandenburg and through deserted pine forests, thence to a large settlement. Suddenly we saw in front of us high walls (about fourteen feet) which, at intervals of two hundred yards, were crowned by watchtowers, so that the whole camp gave the impression of a Chinese city as we knew it from pictures. We drove through an iron gate, and soon after through a second gate in a second inner wall about a hundred feet from the first one. In the space between the two walls there were barracks with administration and treasury buildings, and vegetable and other gardens. The inner gate, which led through the main watchtower, bore the inscription 'Work Makes Free'—an inscription which many inmates of the camp, after years of work and vain hope for release, will probably take as sarcasm.

If, up to now, we had interpreted our fate only as a privation of liberty, our experience changed rapidly. We had to jump down from the truck without the aid of a chair, and the request for a helping hand was denied with abuse. One of our comrades, an older man lacking the agility of youth, fell in this enforced jump and hurt the back of his head so badly that his skin had to be sewed with several stitches. Hardly were we standing on the ground when a pack of young men in S.S. uniforms, with yells and abuse, chased us to the other end of the large, inner, so-called inspection ground, which is surrounded by the barracks of the prisoners. Those who couldn't run fast enough were kicked.

We were first placed in deep rows, ordered to take off our hats and gloves, and told not to stir. Then some of us had to step out and carry through our rows signs mounted on poles with the following inscriptions: 'We are the chosen people' (with the David star over the inscription); 'We are the murderers of the diplomat vom Rath'; 'We are the destroyers of German culture.' The camp lead evidently coming from Saxony, a slender and somewhat coquettish

man with the rank of an officer of the S.S., ordered me to pick up a large paper bag, which an S.S. man put on my head as a cap, and I had to stand like that for some time. This was a harmless attempt at humiliation. Less harmless was the attempt to frighten us through the announcement that we should have to stay in the camp for twenty years. For some these threats were a cause of serious depression even of attempted suicide.

Later that evening we were lined up at the outskirts of the camp, while trucks, arriving constantly, brought new inmates who suffered the same reception as we had before them. After the collective defamation the individual ones began. The camp commander, Baranowsky, a stocky, common-looking man with the insignia of a high rank in the S.S., passed along our rows with his staff. He addressed some, asked their profession, and, in the case of former officials, inquired the amount of their pension, usually commenting that it was too high, especially for a Jew. Arrivals who stood out because of some physical defect were especially ridiculed by him and his staff. Some men wore hearing aids that connected the ear through a wire with a microphone. These were torn out of the ear with rude force, and afterwards inspected by the whole staff as something incredibly strange.

In the meantime the inmates of the camp had assembled for the evening roll call. We heard rhythmic beats on a big drum, and I could see a man walking through the rows of the assembled men carrying a drum in front of him and beating on it. Soon after, loud cries of pain were heard. The carrier of the drum was tied to a block and subjected to twenty-five blows from a steel rod: his punishment for attempting to escape.

It is surprising to me that inmates make any attempt to escape. Already in the first hours of our stay we could convince ourselves of the hopelessness of such an undertaking, being lined up as we were along the inner wall. The watchtowers were occupied by S.S. men with machine guns, and during the darkness rays of searchlights played from them. The guards in the watchtowers, provided with field glasses, were able to see each inmate who might move outside the barracks during the night hours, and they had strict orders to fire at an offender at once. Aside from these guards, mechanical contraptions made escape almost impossible. On the inner sides of the two encircling walls there were tall wire fences charged with a high-voltage current. Inside the wire fence there was a small strip of gravel, in front of which were signs bearing skull and crossbones and this inscription: 'Caution neutral zone.' The guards were instructed to shoot without warning at anybody entering this zone.

II

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when we arrived; nine hours later, without food or drink, we were brought to the so-called reception barrack. At its door stood an S. S. man who tried to hasten the entrance of each novice by a kick in the seat. Inside, inmates used as office help were sitting at long rows of typewriters, and they took down our personal data with stiff military posture - a difficult job for those who hadn't served in the army. To them we had to

give account. Then we had to hand over all our valuables: rings, watches, chains, tie pins, and our wallets and purses with contents. They were exactly registered and kept in paper bags signed by us. (In contrast to reliable reports from other camps, we were given back our money to the last cent and all valuables on the day of our release.)

After this we were taken to another room in which we were forced to strip. Then our heads were clipped short and all signs of beard were removed. According to an old tradition in Germany, the cropped hair is a distinguishing mark of the serf in contrast to the free man. After this procedure and a sort of 'medical examination' by another inmate employed as attendant, we received the benefit of a hot shower, which somewhat refreshed us and loosened up our limbs, stiff from the long stand in the cold.

Then we were fitted out. Strange combinations! The younger and thinner men received, for the most part, old uniforms, even officers' coats without insignia. Others received striped prisoners' garb of relatively light material, a shirt, a pair of socks, and a suit of tissue-thin underwear. No vest, no coat. As headgear there were old soldiers' caps without cockades. It goes without saying that it was very difficult to find clothes fitting the various sizes and shapes. We were a sight grotesque as well as sad.

So, after standing almost continuously for thirteen hours in the cold November air, we were taken to our barracks. There we were permitted to lie down on straw for a short rest until morning. Not until the next day did we receive food and drink. Other groups were much worse off. Some were on their feet for twenty-six hours before they were taken to the barracks.

Our barracks, built for one hundred and fifty men, contained about three hundred and fifty, so that we could not lie on our backs but only on our sides, and could scarcely move without disturbing our neighbors. At half-past six the roll call took place. There were three roll calls a day, one in the morning, one at noon, and a third in the late afternoon. At each roll call we stood at attention, and at least three hours a day were taken up by these roll calls. All except those in the camp hospital had to attend. Some came leaning on the arms of their companions, even men with paralysis who should have been dismissed at once from imprisonment, others with defective feet, and finally those who were unable to move at all and had to be carried. Some among them must have been seriously ill, or else it would hardly have happened that one dropped dead at the roll call—actually dead, for an S. S. man failed in his attempt to revive him by kicks. This 'superior officer' then ordered the comrades of the dead man to close his eyes.

One evening at inspection, the camp commander gave us an address in which he said that we were responsible for the murder of Herr vom Rath and that therefore we had committed a crime against the nation and the state; that we were in a camp for protective custody, which was not a prison or a penitentiary at all, nor a sanitarium either, but solely an educational institution; that we should learn here how to behave in dealing with a 'guest nation' (he really said 'guest' nation instead of 'host' nation); that the main thing was unconditional obedience and that all S.S.

men were our superior officers; that each attempt at disobedience would be punished, in some cases by corporal punishment, and that all S. S. men were entitled to use their arms in any attempt at resistance or escape.

I have been asked repeatedly where all the men were procured who torment the inmates of the camps, often with sadistic lust. We must not forget that a career in the S.S. allures, as a steppingstone, many a youth who cannot quite make the military career, whether for financial reasons or for lack of educational background. There are certainly a great number among them who personify brutality and are glad to be allowed to use their instincts without check against defenseless people. But there are also others who, for the sake of a career, run with the pack, and whose cruelties have been developed by the example of the 'talented' sadists.

III

I have already said I that our barracks were overcrowded. It should be added that, although these barracks contained toilets and washrooms, neither came up to the most modest demands of modern hygiene. The cleansing of our bodies took place in a special room and was limited to a short washing of the upper extremities with cold water. A weekly warm shower was supposed to be provided, but with the overcrowding of the camp it was several weeks before a bath was available for each one. There was, of course, no toilet paper.

The cleansing of mouth and teeth was possible only after a two weeks' stay, when we had access to our money and could buy toothbrushes and tooth paste. The towel situation was deplorable. One towel a week was issued for each inmate, but there was no provision for keeping these towels separately. Not unnaturally skin infections, rashes, and boils were frequent. The barracks were heated by iron stoves, some of which were installed only after our admission to the camp, and we had enjoyed them for but a very short time when a sudden restriction denied us the use of them for one week. It was claimed that in one of the 'Jew barracks' the stove had been lighted at a time when it wasn't allowed.

Since our clothing did not offer enough protection against the prevailing cold—the temperatures were around freezing point—the restriction resulted in many diseases of the respiratory organs. These affected us in two ways: for one, the prisoners with colds were much tormented by coughing, and, for another, the rest of us suffered much from their comforts. In the room in which we were lying penned up together on the straw, with two covers at the most, the snoring alone of the many men produced a noise like a spinning mill. Now the barking and panting noise of the coughing was added to that. We were given only one handkerchief every two weeks. To make matters worse, there was no warm water for washing our handkerchiefs and it was impossible to dry them at the stove.

The food was probably sufficient as far as quantity goes, although our younger companions, who had to work very hard, could not satisfy their appetites. Besides the so-called Komissbrot (a dark bread baked for use in the army), which was difficult to digest for the city dweller not

accustomed to hard physical labor, we usually had thick soups of leguminous plants or potatoes, with lumps of whale meat which, as far as I could find out, came in cans and tasted something like pork. However, it had nothing of the oily taste that might have been expected.

Occasionally we had sweet milk soups with tapioca for breakfast, and for noon evening meal we had sandwiches with usage, cheese, margarine, and jam. It is an open question whether the decided loss in weight of many prisoners was due to the unusual food or to the mental depression. Food so poor in vitamins, however, must cause harm if taken for a long space of time.

After a fortnight we were able to use the money which we had brought in or was sent to us, and it became possible to complete and improve our diet from the canteen at our own expense. We were lined up in rows exactly in the order of our prison numbers, which had been sewed in black on white on our clothes. (This also is penitentiary procedure, for an inmate of the penitentiary is not an individual any more, but only a numbered being without a name.) Then we were led into the barracks where an S.S. man sitting behind a sort of teller's window disbursed the desired sum, up to fifteen marks a week. Somehow I must have transgressed against the military discipline in this procedure. I presume that I had my cap in the wrong hand. Instead of the money I received a violent blow on the back of my hand with a heavy stick which was lying next to the paymaster on his table, obviously for such purposes. Many weeks after this experience the back of my hand was still painful and swollen.

Our daily occupation differed according to age. Prisoners below the forty-fifth year were used for especially hard labor outside the camp in the 'clinker works.' Heavy bags of cement had to be carried for long distances, and the return to the starting point had to be covered at a running pace. For a while the older prisoners were also used outside the camp working on an S.S. settlement. They had to dig or carry cement blocks. All this work was done under the supervision of young S.S. men, most of whom were boys of sixteen to twenty years from former Austria. They circled around us armed with loaded guns or light machine guns. They drove us on and misused their position of superiority with all sorts of torments. If presumably a little offense had been committed, especially if our speed of work didn't satisfy them, they might demand that the prisoner should do knee-bends until he was exhausted or that he roll down the slope a dozen times. In our camp were prisoners ranging in age from fourteen to eighty-four.

Besides tormenting us physically, the S. S. guard continually tried to torment us morally. Coming partly from the lowest proletariat, they tried to annoy us with quotations from the Stürmer. They asked us about the accuracy of supposed quotations from the Talmud which are purported to order the Jew to hate other nations, and especially all Christians. They had little success with these questions, since the prisoners had to answer almost without exception that they did not know more than the name of the Talmud.

Beyond that they tried personal defamation. One of our companions was asked by an S. S. man whether he had been a soldier and what rank he had held in the war. He answered, 'Lieutenant.' The S. S. man said, 'But you were only behind the lines.' 'No,' replied our companion, 'I was at the front.' 'I command you to answer this question with "behind the lines,"' the S. S. man corrected him; 'German history would lie if Jews had actually been at the front, so where were you?' And the old soldier, who had come back decorated with high medals from the war in which he had fought and bled for his German fatherland, was forced to answer, 'Behind the lines.'

Next to physical labor, military drill played an important part, especially for the older men. Still to-day I can hear the command: 'Eyes right! Eyes front!' The drill consisted mainly of marching in large formations and in turns and practising the salute—a quick removal of the cap. Those who did not greet a passing S.S. man with this procedure laid themselves open to severe punishment. A sixty-five-year-old lawyer, who in spite of glasses could see very little, did not salute a passing 'superior officer,' and was struck so that his glasses were broken. His excuse that he was extremely nearsighted was answered with curses.

There was no age limit for participation in the drill, which often lasted between six and eight hours a day. Even the old people had to take part. Those who could not march were lined up in long rows outside the barracks and were not allowed to move, a performance which on cold days meant especial torture for them.

Those who reported for treatment in the infirmary had to line up in front of the infirmary barracks. After a prolonged waiting—often after hours—a doctor appeared and asked about the complaints. Thereupon he divided the prisoners into two categories: category one was examined and received into the sickroom if the occasion warranted it. In very grave cases—supposedly very rarely—inmates were taken to the police infirmary in Berlin. Category two was lined up without any sort of examination in front of the barracks, sometimes for hours, as a punishment, and then sent back to the barracks with the usual reprimands. The chief physician of the camp was called 'Dr. Cruel' by the old inmates. (His real name was Irrsam. 'Cruel' in German is *grausam*; the puns therefore, is not translatable.)

How many men have become the victims of medical treatment—or rather of the lack of it—it is hard to say. I at least have learned about a case where an inmate of our category, about fifty years old, was rejected by the infirmary, treated unprofessionally in the first-aid station, and died the next day. I am not in a position to give statistical data as to whether, and to what extent, suicides of desperate prisoners have taken place. I had occasion only twice to see how prisoners tried to run into the charged wires of the fence in order to commit suicide. They were stopped at the last moment. One morning the corpse of a man who had succeeded in his undertaking was hanging in the meshes. It was said that it was the

prisoner whose punishment we had witnessed on the day of our arrival at the camp.

As far as we could see, there was no possibility in camp for any religious services. Sundays are workdays for the inmates. Among the Jewish prisoners the rabbis were treated especially badly. Officially the fight against religious affiliations is not admitted, but as a matter of fact National Socialism is no less antireligious than Bolshevism, with the only difference that it has not yet developed quite so far in the amalgamation of political and religious ideologies.

Even in the evening, when we had sunk wearily on our straw cots, we were not safe from the cruel whims of the S. S. men. If we didn't jump up quickly enough at their sudden appearance they made us practise jumping up and lying down until we were exhausted, or they had the entire ward line up outside the barracks in the cold and stand for half an hour or longer in the attitude of the 'Saxon Salute'—that is, with hands folded behind the head. If an S.S. man entered the barracks in the daytime and was not seen at once by the inmate cleaning up and not saluted, then he might very well have the 'culprit' crawl in and out of the straw a dozen times for punishment. The guards were like mean children who torment animals.

IV

When the day of release came we were at first searched most carefully for any sort of written notes. Notes from our family—a short, well-watched exchange was allowed every week—had to be left behind. Then we were permitted to put on our civilian clothes, but how they looked! They had been disinfected under high steam pressure and had been wrapped in bundles. They looked like the outfits of tramps, all creased and out of shape. Soft felt hats had turned into cardboard-like monsters no longer usable, and even on our short trip back they could not be worn.

The release took almost twelve hours, during which we had to stand in line waiting in the open air, without food. Part of the release ceremonies was the address of an S.S. man. He called our attention to the fact that we were forbidden to tell anything that we had seen in the camp. Although we all had to fill in a form of this nature, I cannot recognize an obligation in this respect, not only because it was forced, but also because it was imposed by a party that habitually does not keep its promises.

Since for the first time in a long life we had become the objects of a course of action that deprived us of any liberty, it is somewhat difficult to judge whether the commander of the camp was right in saying that the camp was no prison, no penitentiary.

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