

# The Forward Eagle

News, Reviews & Elisions  
Of Mutual Interest  
Compiled Weekly by Tim Forward  
for  
The Riverdale Senior Services Center  
Bronx, NY

Current events

Briefly Noted  
An anniversary is  
a current event too

The Economist  
April 25, 2025

The American journalist Martha Gellhorn was at Dachau when the German army surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. It was a suitable place to be. Surely, she reported, the war had been made to abolish forever Dachau and the cemetery prisons like it and all that Dachau stood for.

Gellhorn, sadly, was wrong: the second world war has not prevented the re-emergence of “cemetery prisons” or, as they are normally called, concentration camps.

Concentration camps have continued to scar the world, whether in colonial Kenya and Indochina, in communist countries, the Russia, China and North Korea, or in Latin American dictatorships.

However much the Dachau camp may hold for contemporary relevance, the specificity of the Axis regimes continues to shock us, and what the liberating armies uncovered in 1945 continues to defy the imagination.

In 1933 Dachau was the first of the Nazi concentration camps to be created. In the 12 years of its existence, it changed a great deal in terms of inmate numbers and demographics; as the main training center for SS guards, it was never anything less than brutal.

When the US Army arrived at Dachau on April 29, 1945, there were 67,665 registered inmates, 12,067 of them Hungarian, and 22,000 were Jews. More than half were held in the main camp and the rest in one of around 100 sub-camps, such as Allach and Kaufering, that had been created in the closing years of the war.

Dachau was the “exemplary” concentration camp, crucial for building the Aryan “racial community” by holding those who were excluded from it, and, by threatening others to stay away.

It was not a “Holocaust” camp; it was not created to be or eventually used as a place where Jews and other victims were sent to be murdered. It was certainly a murderous place, particularly at the war’s end, when Jews and others were sent there on death marches as the camps farther east were evacuated in the face of the Red Army’s advance.

Some 40,000 inmates died at Dachau, almost half of them in the last four months of the War in Europe.

American soldiers discovered more than 30 rail cars filled with corpses. Dachau had become, indistinguishable from a death camp.

It was not surprising that after the initial euphoria at the Americans’ arrival—a joy in which only the physically able could partake—survivors experienced intense feelings of guilt, fear and loneliness.

Ephraim Poremba, a Polish Jew who was liberated at Allach, said that the American soldiers “looked at us as though we had landed from Mars”. One soldier, James Creasman, recalled that he and his colleagues “could not believe what they saw. Riflemen, accustomed to witnessing death, had no stomach for rooms stacked almost ceiling-high with tangled human



Stadelheim Prison was surrounded by open fields in rural Bavaria as in this photo from the 1920s

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In 1945 near the end of the war in Europe the order was given at the Stadelheim Prison complex to continue to execute inmates until the end of the hostilities. During the National Socialist era, more than a thousand prisoners died at Stadelheim. Shortly before the conquest of Munich, prisoners were still being executed and the prison defended by the German army. It is said that the prison staff refused to carry out their orders. Anarchic conditions prevailed at Stadelheim for some time even after the surrender. ■

bodies adjoining the cremation furnaces, looking like some maniac’s woodpile.”

At a ceremony in Munich in June 1945, Zalman Grinberg, spokesman for the liberated Jews in the American zone of occupied Germany, said to the 1,700 Jewish survivors present: “It seems to us that for the time being mankind does not comprehend what we have gone through and what we have experienced. It seems to us too that neither shall we be understood in the future. We unlearned to laugh, we cannot cry any more, we do not comprehend our freedom yet, because we are still among our dead comrades.” For many survivors this was not a moment of celebration.

Commemorations have continued through the decades, each time, with fewer survivors. In the early post-war period, Bavarian authorities were reluctant to face the reality of Dachau’s recent past. The first commemorations were organized by survivor associations from various countries outside of Germany. These groups had to press for a memorial site to be opened at Dachau.

Today their struggles are too often forgotten; it is hard to imagine how Nico Rost, a Dutch survivor, felt when he visited the former camp in 1955, and found almost no information explaining the history of the concentration camp. Instead, Rost found a kindergarten that had been set up in the former infirmary and a butcher’s shop that occupied the building where inmates had been subjected to malaria, ice-water and high-altitude experiments.

Commemorations, reflecting changing attitudes in Europe, have shifted from denial to the quiet acceptance by Europeans of the fact that the prison and cemetery camps operated unhindered within their midst.

Dachau, like the other former prison camp memorial sites, is at the forefront of the remembrance of fascism, in the face of growing

far-right parliamentary representation in Europe’s capitals. The presence of these authentic sites as museums serves to keep the memory of the past alive, and as a warning to the future generations of all nations.

The museums speak not just to the *Deutschsprachigeraum*.

Aryan sympathizers and separatists were and still are a force to be reckoned with the world over: Europe, the British Isles, North and South America, Africa and South Africa, the Near and Middle East, Asia and the Far East.

The emotions surrounding the 80th anniversary of liberation of Dachau are to some similar to those of Marcus Smith, an American army doctor present 1945: “An incredible sight that is beyond experience. Horror-stricken, outraged, we react with disbelief. I shut my eyes. I try to remember the redeeming attributes of man. None come to mind.” ■

## The Forward Eagle

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This paper is offered as a review of recent topics taken up by the current events discussion group at Riverdale Senior Services Center.

Please join us at the Center for Ageless Living, 2600 Netherland Avenue, Bronx, NY each Monday at 1:00 o’clock in the afternoon for Current Events with Tim.

This week’s photo and article were excerpted and edited from *The Economist* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The *Economist* article was written by Dan Stone, a Professor of Modern History at Royal Holloway, University of London.