

# Incident at Dachau

by Irv Baum  
(South Camp)

*Irving Fredrick Baum  
my little Room-mate*

When the initial group of liberating GIs came through Stalag VIIA, the first question was "Where are you from?" I answered "Monticello, NY," and an armored type said he was from the neighboring village of Liberty. His name was George Wahrhaftig and he in fact was a nephew of our next door neighbor. There was the usual shouting and laughing and marvelling at the way people meet and what a small world this is and what is the latest news from our neck of the woods.

**"I just wanted to get to the other side of the wire."**

Wahrhaftig asked me if I'd heard of a place called Dachau. To my recollection I may have heard of it, but I certainly didn't know its loca-

tion. He then told me what had occurred in other camps which had been liberated by the Americans, British, and the Russians. He thought that they needed people who could speak either Yiddish or German and asked would I want to help if I was in good enough shape.

I was in good shape, although I had lost weight. I had gotten a kriegie haircut several days earlier, but my clothes were ready for the trash. He said that would be taken care of by the Jewish chaplain's assistant. Altruism was not a factor in my wanting to do any of this. At that moment I just wanted to get to the other side of the wire, be part of the excitement associated with all that armor, and find out what they were talking about when they used the term concentration camp. I'm not sure, but I believe the chaplain's assistant's name was Rothenberger.

After introductions, we went in a jeep about three miles behind what I presumed was the front line, where there was a PX literally on wheels parked next to a building with communications gear and other headquarters-type activity, including a Finance Officer. I drew \$300, and the only identification I had was the US Army dog tag and my kriegie dog tag. This let me get two sets of fatigues and a set of khakis plus the other items needed, all stowed in a barracks bag which Rothenberger had scared up. It was here I met another kriegie—enlisted Army type. He said he was from the 14th Armored, and had been captured in late February. He hoped to rejoin his outfit in the Munich area.

We finally got moving south at 1700 hours, stopping for the night in a small village after about two hours of riding. The road to Dachau was the most pulverized piece of real estate I had ever seen. The traffic was incredible. The shouting and the noise from masses of engines to this day defy adequate description. Every now and then we could hear small arms

fire almost exclusively to the left of us. We were all wearing helmets and I quickly found out that between the continuous mini roller coaster ride and an improperly worn helmet, your head can really hurt.

We had breakfast rations at 0600 hours, refueled at a fuel dump, and in another two hours we were three to four kilometers northeast of Dachau when the first hint of an odor or a smell or, as we got nearer, a stench alerted Rothenberger that we were getting close. Then came the first of what I believe were three road checks in quick succession. It appeared that MPs were directing operations traffic to the southeast while we went southwest. I have always thought that the check points were to make sure that traffic was flowing in the right directions as opposed to security requirements. I have never to this day seen a greater concentration of armored vehicles of all types.

The Jeep was parked at some kind of headquarters where about a dozen large tents had been set up. Several of them had red crosses. I followed Rothenberger and starting to wonder what I was doing here and what help I could be with all these people already here. He located the chaplain who gave him a soft chewing out for not accompanying him the day before. Introductions were short. I was given a coarse long-sleeve jacket to wear over my fatigues, a pair of gloves and two surgical masks. We followed the chaplain to a station where everyone was getting a good dose of DDT down their backs and down their pants. Then we were told what to expect and what we would be doing most of the day.

I walked into Dachau through an opening that had been cut on the opposite side of the camp's main entrance. The stench, the cacophony of barked orders among the Americans mingling with sounds made by the just-freed inmates, and the feces-covered ground not only hit me all at once, but they remain the paramount images I have to this day. We went to an area where I had my first encounter with multitudes of emaciated corpses piled three or four high. Rothenberger and I simultaneously became acutely nauseated and we did what so many others had been doing. We went to a designated spot, which looked more like a latrine trench, as fast as we could to take care of the problem. Just as you are responsible for cleaning up your own cockpit, here we were responsible for going to the lime bag and covering the results.

**"The stench..."**

(Page four, please)

## Incident at Dachau

(from page three)

The task at hand was to unpile the bodies as a medic went over each one to determine whether there was any one alive. There were about two dozen people doing this. To minimize handling the bodies, cloth body bags were put over them and then tightened at both ends and the body rolled off the pile. I was told that they had found several people alive who had been lying among piles of corpses at other liberated camps. I do not know the outcome of our

work although I have always believed that no survivors were found. I did this for less than two hours when Rothenberger said that the medics needed help in feeding surviv-

**"...correct feeding was a matter of life or death."**

ing inmates.

By this time ambulatory cases, among them about 25 to 30 children around ten to twelve years old, were seated against the barracks' walls. Others were already lying on stretchers to be taken to medical facilities. I was involved with the latter. An MD instructed us to not spread ourselves too thin so that we could pay attention to three or four individuals because correct feeding was a matter of life or death. I am trying to remember the procedure. I believe the eyedropper contained a glucose mixture. By cradling the individual's head in your arms, you could drip it on the tongue. Then a very very small piece of white bread was moistened with the dropper and placed on the tongue. There was always an attempt to swallow without chewing and a rough grasp on your arm as the individual tried to eat more.

All the medics and other Army personnel were feverishly attending to these people in the midst of the worst circumstances I have ever seen. No matter where you looked or kneeled everything was literally putrid — the people, their clothing, and the very ground upon which they were lying. I was able to assist with two men and one young woman. Many had already been tagged with pertinent information, and I remember that she came from Lyon, France. I tried a few Yiddish words, but got no responses. Just being there with the little that could be done for them on an immediate basis was acknowledged by the looks in their eyes.

Neither Rothenberger nor I had eating on our minds—we would have gotten ill again—and so it was at about 1430 hours that we decided we had done all that we could. Inwardly, I couldn't take any more; not from the wretched humanity, but from the continuous and overpowering stench from which you couldn't find any respite. The medics and other Army personnel who persevered were and are to me to this very day the epitome of heroism, compassion, and sensitivity.

We found where our quarters were for the night, were told to throw away our clothes, showered, DDT'd again, and ate mashed potatoes, peas and carrots, and a hamburger. Between the day's experiences and my probably shrunken stomach, I couldn't keep down what little I ate. Others came into the chow tent by this time and it was here that I heard about the line of box cars which were on a siding and when opened contained many additional bodies.

I told Rothenberger that not only was this too much for me mentally and physically, but all that I had bargained for was to get outside of Stalag VIIA and see what a concentration camp looked like. I had completely lost track of George Wahrhaftig after the first few hours at VIIA. There was lots of traffic going north and Rothenberger said he would take care of a ride for me back. I was literally sick and tired and slept about ten hours.

On May 1, just after breakfast, we walked back to the compound and almost the same scenes greeted us. But this time there were far fewer former inmates to be seen. There were three bull dozers starting to scoop out rather large pits and a number of trucks were inside the camp loaded down with bags of lime. I did not get to see him, but I heard that General Eisenhower had arrived and was at the other end of the camp site. About an hour later we heard that Eisenhower had given orders which in effect required civilians from the city of Dachau and other surrounding areas to go through the camp and perform various tasks.

There was a group of three 6-x-6 trucks going north. I got back to "good old Stalag VIIA" in the afternoon. The only questions asked by my cube mates was how did I get a pair of new fatigues—my second set, as the first one had to be tossed—and a set of khakis. I didn't realize how shook I was until I tried to talk to Red Lewis about the past 4 hours and then I could not go into very much detail.

I returned to Dachau forty years later, October 1985. It was now a museum. The guard towers were still there along with the infamous main entry gate. Just two or three barracks were left and the foundation piers were identified. Along with the crematorium were neat signs identifying mass graves, dead ditches, and an area of some sculptured pieces. The former administration and reception building was now the one place, through the enlarged photographs where people could get a pseudo-reasonable idea what occurred here. Everything was very sterile. I am convinced that it was not to hide guilt, but I believe it was to avoid offending the senses of current visitors. The comments written in the Visitors' Log ranged from nonbelief to disbelief to surprise shock to anger to sadness to crushing guilt.

**"box cars ... contained many additional bodies"**

**"...good old Stalag VIIA"**

Anthony Alaimo went to the opera one night in wartime Milan. It was a memorable experience. He was an escaping POW and he found himself sitting next to a German officer, in the full and fearsome regalia of an SS colonel.

## A Night At The Opera

*...very good friend*  
by Anthony A. Alaimo (N,C,S)

Stalag VIIA held enlisted men as well as officers. Under the Geneva Convention, which the Germans went through the motions of observing, officers could not be worked—not always a blessing—but enlisted men could. Thus the Germans box-carred many enlisted men each day to Munich to help clean up the rubble caused by daily bombing.

One day a group of enlisted men came into our compound on a work detail. I approached one of them and asked him if he wanted to switch with me and stay in the Officers' Compound. He readily agreed, not knowing that conditions were worse there, and we exchanged dog tags. I went out with his detail, and in the days following I was included in the working parties taken to Munich. There I scrounged through the rubble and collected some raggedy civilian clothes I hoped to use in an escape attempt. I had tentatively decided that I would try to get to Lake Constance, at the Swiss border. In preparation I had learned that there were French Commando Camps in our area, compounds of French workmen who had been impressed by the Germans to work their large state farms. I found out that one of them was located about 10 miles south of Munich, in a town named Gruenwald, and I planned to aim for it if I succeeded in getting away.

### Luck Plays a Hand

I cannot stress too much how important luck was to the success of an escape. My experience proves it, without question, unless it was the unstinting prayers of my mother.

The morning I decided to make my attempt I had packed my little horde of chocolate bars, socks, and cigarettes in a rucksack, and joined the line to the box cars. Inexplicably, that morning the Germans decided to spot check the prisoners. As luck would have it, the guard started searching the man in front of me in the line, so that I passed without being searched. If I had been searched and my supplies discovered, the jig would have been up. But I was not home free. At the box car there was another spot check. I did not know whether to go to the head of the line, or to the end with the hope that the search would be ended before the guard got to me. I decided to go to the head of the line. While the guard was searching the prisoner ahead of me and his back was partially

turned, I tossed my rucksack into one corner of the box car. The guard did not see it.

In Munich our group was taken to a military academy to clean out the rubble. During the latter part of the morning an air raid forced us to go to the basement of the building for shelter. In the course of the raid I was able to get away from the group gathered in a large room, to a small room down the hall, which was completely unoccupied. It had a broken-out window at eye-level. I took off my GI clothing, under which I had the civilian clothes. I then noticed the German sergeant in charge of our detail coming up the walk in my direction. Why he did not see me is one of the inexplicable strokes of luck which came my way that day.

### Through the Window

When he disappeared into the building, I crawled out the window and started to walk down the street. The hardest thing to do was to walk and act as if I belonged. It was very difficult to resist the temptation to look around and see if anybody was following me. Nevertheless, I succeeded in locating Route #2, the highway to the south.

That afternoon I located Gruenwald and the farm where the French were located. When I got there, I told the first Frenchman I saw—they were unmistakable—who I was and asked their help. He readily agreed. They fed me that night and hid me in the attic when the Germans came to count them. And later—this is really unbelievable—I joined them in a hand of bridge and made one of the few grand slams I have ever made. Strange what trivialities one remembers.

The Gruenwald Frenchmen gave me some food and directions to the next French-operated farm. The directions were bizarre. The town was Traubing; the farm was located in a fork in the road just south of the town, where I would see a Frenchman pitching hay from a wagon. I was somewhat dubious, but followed directions. Lo and behold, the Frenchman was indeed in a farm yard pitching hay. He readily took me to the farm where the French workers were located. There the barracks chief decided my hair was too long and would create suspicion. So I got a haircut.

The next morning I was given directions to the French Commandos in a city called Starnberg, some 15 kilometers away. There the barracks chief decided that I should go into Italy via the Brenner Pass, both because of my knowledge of Italian and because the Swiss border was more heavily patrolled and guarded. That night he took me to the train station. Of course there was a blackout. He purchased a ticket to Innsbruck, the northern side of the Pass, and slipped it to me as he passed by, with a "Bon Chance."

(Next page, please)

## A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

(continued from previous page)

To my dismay, I noticed the Gestapo checking passes at the gate. Because of the darkness, I was able to step over the iron-pipe waist-high fence unseen by the Gestapo, and melt into the crowd boarding the cars.

The train stopped at GarmishPartenkirchen. All the passengers disembarked; many of them, including myself, went into a rather large station. Inside were many Italians returning home to Italy. I joined one of their groups, revealing my identity to one of them who gave me some information and ideas about getting into Italy. I boarded the train to Innsbruck with this group. There we disembarked into a large warehouse with sleeping and eating facilities for the returning Italians, apparently operated by the Italian Government. I readily mingled with them, got food stamps for bread, and was assigned a cot.

### Into the Tunnel

Two days later the train for Balzano was announced. I boarded it, and when it arrived at the Brenner Pass at the border, everyone again disembarked. At the Pass I noticed a group of Italian soldiers, who appeared to be escorted by two German guards. It developed that they were prisoners of war of the Germans, those who had rebelled against them after Badoglio's capitulation. There were 35 of them. I mingled with them in the train station and noticed that they were being split into two groups, one of 18 men and the other, 17. I attached myself to the 17, and finally concluded that the German guard thought he had taken the group of 18.

In the middle of the Pass further rail transport was impossible because of the bombing damage. After walking some distance, we were put on a large, charcoal-burning truck for the trip towards Brescia. It later developed that the truck's ultimate destination was Milan. During the ride to Brescia one of the Italian prisoners gave me the address of an Italian partisan in Milan who would help me. The truck arrived in Brescia at nightfall; the soldiers disembarked; I remained on in one of the darkened corners of the truck.

During the trip to Milan many civilians jumped on the truck for transportation into the city. I struck up a conversation with an elderly lady, telling her I was trying to get to Sicily, where my family had been bombed out. She took pity on me, and although miserably poor herself, gave me a 50 Lira note, which I later used for streetcar fare. Upon the truck's arrival at Milan, Italian soldiers began checking papers of our group. Another stroke of luck—the law of averages must have been suspended for me on that trip—while the guard was searching another person, I slipped behind his back to join the ones who had been searched.

I have never forgotten the address of the partisan, "Corso della Porta Ticinese, numero 77." I got directions, took a streetcar to the magnificent Roman Gate through which the street ran, and found the address, a pastry shop, where all sorts of cookies were being baked. A hungry prisoner's dream!

### The Italian Connection

I asked the proprietor if he knew the person I was looking for. He indicated he did and went to look for him. He returned and said the man was no longer there. He asked what I wanted. I decided to tell him who I was, and asked that he not turn me in if he couldn't help me. The man, the wonderful man, Vincent DeMarco, laughed and said, of course he could help; and that he did.

He got me the appropriate papers by bribing some officials, a new set of clothes, and an apartment in a bombed out building which was unoccupied. One of my fondest memories was the twice-daily streetcar ride between the apartment and the bakery, that passed in front of Il Duomo, that magnificent multi-spired cathedral of Milan. It was during this period that I attended the opera and found myself sitting next to an SS colonel.

### Under the Fence

About three weeks later DeMarco, by pre-arrangement, took me by train to Lake Como on the Swiss border, to the home of a Turkish woman who was a friend of his and through whom he had arranged for a guide to take me to the Swiss border. Later that night, after eating and drinking a bottle of wine, we embraced and bade each other goodbye. The guide led me about two miles up the mountainside to a chicken wire fence which marked the border. He lifted the bottom of the fence; I crawled under to freedom.

I walked into the little town of Ponte Chiasso in the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland, brightly lit up. This was the first lighted town I had seen in Europe during the war. I went to the police station and gave myself up.

The next day I was taken by train to Bellinzona, capital of the province. There I hoped to contact the American consulate, but I was momentarily prevented from doing so. My false identity papers convinced the Swiss interrogator that I was an Italian. I remonstrated vigorously, and finally caught the attention of a Swiss major, who eventually sent me to the American consulate in Geneva, under guard. I was on my way home.

(Anthony Alaimo was a 24 year-old 1st Lieutenant at the time of his escape. He became the chief Federal judge in the Southern District of Georgia.)

# Gedicht für einen Kriegsgefangenen

## (A Poem for a Prisoner of War)

The Russians were sweeping through Germany  
And would soon free the Kriegies from Stalag Luft III.  
The Kommandant could not lose face,  
He ordered a march at a speedy pace.  
Through blinding blizzard four days and nights  
They dropped dead from exhaustion, hunger, cold and fright.

The temperature near zero, soldiers trying to stay alive,  
Sixty miles of willing each other to survive,  
Snaked a path through the winter on frozen feet  
With only half-rations and Reichbrot to eat.  
Finally crowded into boxcars, floors covered with manure  
Unable to sit in their moving coffin, they endured.

They disembarked the train in Mooseburg  
The horrors of which had not yet been heard.  
Toilets overflowing, barracks dark and damp,  
Worm-infested food, lice and bedbugs filled the camp.  
Eighty-thousand prisoners with little room to roam  
Wishing each passing day for a single word from home.

The desperate months they did survive  
Finally hearing General Patton would soon arrive.  
Words can not describe the feeling inside  
A mix of disbelief, fear, joy and American pride  
As they watched from rooftops with misty eyes  
The Nazi flag descended as the Stars and Stripes did rise.

Weeks later approaching the homeland's shore  
There rose a sight they had feared they'd see no more.  
Welcoming back those men of ground and sky  
Stood Lady Liberty holding her lamp on high.  
We can not understand what that moment meant  
As hearts filled and heads with prayers were bent.

Fifty years have now gone by  
But each time snowflakes begin to fly  
My father remembers those who did not survive  
"The Death March" that winter of '45.  
I thank you all for the price you have paid for me,  
That I may know the joys of what it means to be free.  
Cynthis Baldwin Avery, daughter of Lt. Baldwin C. Avery,  
B-24 pilot shot down May 12, 1944,  
and prisoner of Stalag Luft III, West Compound

