

Globethics Repository



Dachau—remembering the unforgettable

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Gunn, Jennie;Gunn,, Carroll
Publisher	Online Journal of Health Ethics
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-09 04:02:56
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/176328

Dachau—Remembering the Unforgettable

Jennie Gunn PhD, FNP
Associate Professor
University of Mississippi Medical Center
School of Nursing-Oxford

Carroll Gunn, MA
University of Mississippi

Abstract

Ethical research provides great benefit to the public, but ethical research is not guaranteed. Research can go terribly wrong when research subjects are not protected. Egos of scientists and others in power can cause disastrous results, and that is what happened at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. Because of incidents such as this, medical research at universities is now reviewed by Institutional Review Boards to protect subjects. But not so long ago, in the Dachau concentration camp, researchers were free to impose pain and death upon prisoners in the name of research. Prisoners were mistreated to glean knowledge; many suffered for the advancement of science and man's ego. The history of such events is haunting. It must never happen again, and so mankind studies the past to protect the future. For if it is true that history repeats itself, mankind must be armed with the knowledge of history.

Key Words: Ethics, Dachau, German concentration camps

Dachau—Remembering the Unforgettable

Dachau concentration camp, outside of Munich, Germany, allows a glance into the past. At the camp, research was carried out on prisoners; and research can go terribly wrong when research subjects are not protected. Egos of scientists and others in power can cause disastrous results. That is what happened at the Dachau concentration camp.



Photograph 1: Dachau Entrance
Courtesy of Carroll Gunn

Because of incidents such as this, medical research at universities is now reviewed by Institutional Review Boards to protect subjects. But in the Dachau concentration camp, researchers were free to impose pain and death upon prisoners in the name of research. Prisoners were mistreated to glean knowledge; many suffered for the advancement of science and man's ego. The history of such events is haunting. It must never happen again, and so mankind studies the past to protect the future. For if it is true that history repeats itself, mankind must be armed with the

knowledge of history to prevent it.

From Munich, the capitol of Bavaria, to Dachau is a 20 minute train and bus ride. It is only 10 miles from Munich through the suburbs (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008). Visitors to Dachau exit the train onto a platform that sits downhill from a McDonald's restaurant and a German deli. Tour groups pour in and out of the camp. Groups of young students carrying music devices walk through the gate. The students are told to turn off their music as they approach the entrance. Dachau deserves silence. The crunch of the gravel under feet is reminiscent of the sound of marching soldiers.

Dachau concentration camp was established by the Nazi government under the direction of Heinrich Himmler (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia,

2008). The site was originally a factory before it became a prison. Prisoners were “opponents of the Nazi regime, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma (Gypsies), homosexuals,” and “repeat criminal offenders” (USHMME, 2008, para. 2). Later, Jewish people would be added to the prisoner population. The camp was open from 1933 to 1945. During this 12 year operation, 188,000 prisoners were held in Dachau, but the number who died may never be determined; many were unnamed.

As visitors walk the grounds of the camp, the damp cold envelopes them. The main camp is at the right, while rows and rows of blank spaces, neatly lined, blanketed the ground to the left—ghosts of the barracks that once stood on the ground. At the far end of the camp are memorial buildings, much like churches, and then a path that leads to the crematoriums, gas chamber, and the woods that hid the blood ditch and the ashes of prisoners.



Photograph 3: Cell Wall in Dachau Concentration Camp
Courtesy of Carroll Gunn

In the main building, to the far right of the grounds, are dimly lit, thin, long hallways.

Chains wrap around the gates that divide the prison cell sections secured with huge pad locks.

Inside the cells, painted plaster peels from the walls of the tiny cubicles; some have windows—some do not. It was a place of

terror where men squatted in corners, listening for sounds from the

distance, unable to talk to others. Their destiny lay in the hands of the

guards. The washing and toilet areas are a reminder of the prison conditions. There are no walls or curtains separating the toilets or large sinks. Prisoners were forced to sleep in



Photograph 2: Prison Gate in Dachau Concentration Camp
Courtesy of Carroll Gunn

cubicles without separation between beds. It was either crowded barracks or solitary confinement.

Dachau was a prison and an experimentation camp. In addition to psychological and physical torture, medical experiments were carried out at Dachau by German physicians. “Among the worst atrocities committed at the infamous Dachau concentration camp were the cruel and inhumane experiments, using prisoners as guinea pigs, conducted by Dr. Sigmund Rascher for the benefit of the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force” under the direction of Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler (Scrap Book Pages, 2007, Medical Experiment sect., para. 1). Research projects included “high-altitude experiments using a decompression chamber, malaria and tuberculosis experiments, hypothermia experiments, and experiments testing new medications. Prisoners were forced to test methods of making seawater potable and of halting excessive bleeding” (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, 2008, para. 7). Many died or suffered effects for the remainder of their lives (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008).

The Jewish Virtual Library, a division of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, reported Rascher conducted freezing experiments on prisoners to improve “methods of reviving pilots whose planes go down over cold water” (2008, October 3, 1942 sect.). During the study, around 300 prisoners were placed in ice water tanks for hours and then revived when possible. Prisoners had no choice in their participation, and about 100 people died from the research. The Nazi doctors reported the prisoners used for experiments were either volunteers or “had been condemned to death” (Scrap Book Pages, 2008, para. 5).

“The subject was immersed in a chamber of ice cold water, dressed in a full flying outfit complete with a lifejacket. It took up to an hour and a half for the subject’s temperature to fall to 29.5 degrees and the body temperature continued to fall after the subjects were removed from the water” (Scrap Book Pages, 2008, para. 10). Only those who had the back

of their neck immersed in the icy water died. They were wearing a particular type of life jacket. Rascher also reported another finding, rapid warming was better than slow warming. “Rewarming by animal warmth, or by the use of women’s bodies, was found to be too slow” (para. 11).

Dr. Rascher reported an additional finding in a letter in 1943, (Scrap Book Pages, 2008, para. 13):

Up to the present I have carried out intense chilling experiments on thirty human beings by leaving them outside naked from nine to fourteen hours, thereby reducing their body temperature to 27-29 degrees. After an interval which was supposed to correspond to a period of transport lasting one hour, I placed these experimental subjects in a hot bath. In all experiments to date all subjects were successfully rewarmed within another hour despite the fact that their hands and feet were partly frozen white....No fatalities occurred as a result of extraordinarily rapid method of rewarming.

Another freezing experiment was carried out on two Russian officers who were put in icy water for approximately four hours (Scrap Book Pages, 2008, para. 15). Dr. Rascher held his gun on an aide who tried to give them chloroform. It was around the third hour of the ice water experiment when the two men told each other goodbye.

Inmates were also subjected to tropical disease research. Dr. Klaus Schilling was ordered to do these experiments by Himmler (Scrap Book Pages, 2008, Medical Experiments sect., para. 3). His goal was to find a cure for malaria. Malaria was a serious problem at the time for the German soldiers. Schilling used various drugs on the prisoners who were mostly young Polish priests infected by mosquitoes purposely.

“Malarial experiments on about 1,200 people were conducted by Dr. Klaus Schilling between 1941 and 1945” as ordered by Himmler (Scrap Book Pages, 2008, Medical Experiments sect., para. 5). The prisoners were injected with malaria or allowed to be bitten by known carrier mosquitoes. Autopsies were conducted later and deaths were reported to be

both from the malaria and the treatment. He argued at his trial the study was for the good of mankind.

In addition to medical tests, there is indication from letters that Dr. Sigmund Rascher “experimented with putting men to death in the Dachau gas chamber” (Mazal, 2007, Dr. Sigmund Rascher sect., para. 8).



Photograph 4: Bathroom area within Dachau concentration camp, courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 5: Washing area inside Dachau Concentration Camp.



Photograph 6: Sleeping area within Dachau Concentration Camp.



Photograph 7: Window inside cell Dachau concentration camp.



Photograph 8: Inside prison cell in Dachau Concentration Camp. Photos courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 5: Area surrounding Dachau concentration camp, Courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 6: Barbed-wire fence surrounding Dachau concentration camp, Courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 7: Statue at Dachau concentration camp, Courtesy of Carroll Gunn

There were many other prison camps in addition to Dachau. Experiments of the Holocaust at all camps included: freezing and hypothermia (icy vats and outside temperature extremes) (Remember, 2008), genetic manipulation (only blonde, blue eyed, strong men were desirable while “Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals” and others deemed undesirable were to be removed from society) (Genetic experiment sect., para. 1), infectious disease inoculation, interrogation, torture, genocide, high altitude studies, drug and medicine testing, sterilization, surgical experiments, and the administration of inflicted torture (sun lamp burns, hot baths) (Remember, 2008). Mustard gas experiments, sulfanilamide experiments, bone, muscle and nerve experiments, transplant experiments, jaundice experiments, sterilization experiments, spotted fever experiments and poison experiments were also carried out (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008).

The bodies piled up faster than they could be buried in mass graves. Piles of bones covered by thin skin lay rotting. Crematoriums were built to prevent the spread of disease and to dispose of the bodies of those who died from malnutrition, disease, torture, and research experimentation. The first crematorium ovens were built in 1940, and the crematorium complex was built in 1942 (Mazal, 2007). The dead prisoners were at first buried until the numbers became so great that other methods of disposal were utilized. Soon the ovens could not keep up with the deaths; additional ovens were built. Mazal described the crematoriums as incinerators because the bodies were constantly added and not burned one at the time. Many bodies were burned together to save time. “There were four ovens, with a capacity of 7 or 8 bodies each at a time—even nine when the bodies were very emaciated” (Mazal, 2007, Disposal of bodies sect., para. 13). A gas chamber was also built to fumigate as well as to kill.

Today, ashes from the crematoriums still lay in a certain area near a ditch called the blood ditch. The woods leading to the blood ditch are breathtaking. The path is narrow and clean covered by the overhang of the trees. Wildflowers color the forest floor in the spring. Had it not been that this was a place of horror, it would be one of the most beautiful gardens in Germany. Visitors say it is a place of tranquility and peace that blankets the earlier agony that occurred there.

People gasp as they look into the ovens. Some cannot tolerate the view and do not walk down the beautiful path toward the building where they were housed. Others cannot stay away. Some visitors say they had to come; it was their duty. It is a painful duty and tears are near for some who peer inside. The deafening silence looms in the peaceful woods and crushes down on visitors.

When American forces arrived to the concentration camps 67,665 prisoners were found (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, 2008). The American troops found bodies “piled up helter-skelter in the morgue of the new crematorium” and around the grounds (Mazal, 2007, Liberation sect., para 1-2). An even more horrific finding was the “30 railroad cars filled with bodies brought to Dachau, all in an advanced state of decomposition” (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008, The Liberation sect., para. 5).

The Nazi army provided statistics in January of 1945 (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008). Of the 55,000 prisoners, more than 2,000 of them were women. Little was mentioned about the outcome of the women and children. It is known, however, women were used in medical experiments as warmers (Remember, 2008). Dr. Rascher, as instructed by Himmler, used women to attempt to raise the body temperatures of freezing men. Himmler demanded the man and woman engage in sexual intercourse; Rascher found this was less effective for warming than warm water baths.

Upon leaving the prison, the gate stands open that prisoners saw as they entered. It was a “cynical Nazi slogan” molded into the iron grillwork that separated the prisoners from freedom. The words “Arbeit Macht Frei” translate to “Work sets you free or work liberates” in English; but it was not true for Dachau (The History Place, 1977, para. 7).

The gate closes as visitors exit, and the metal clasp clicks shut. It is hopeful that the pain remains there and does not transfer anywhere else. And for a brief moment, visitors may picture men with protruding bones in striped heavy clothing, slumped over, chained at the legs, walking down the dusty lane toward the edge of the camp where the crematoriums lay hidden. And just when visiting intruders catch their breath, the vision appears of prisoners turning their heads ever so gently to look with their hollow eyes at the gate. There would be no freedom for many of them until their last breath.



Photograph 12: Art sculpture at Dachau concentration camp, Courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 13: Path to "blood ditch" at Dachau concentration camp, Courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 14 and 15: Crematorium ovens inside Dachau concentration camp, Courtesy of Carroll Gunn



Photograph 16: Gate at entrance to Dachau concentration camp. Courtesy of Carroll Gun

Editorial Note: The opinions expressed by authors represent those of the authors and do not reflect the opinions of the editorial staff of The Online Journal of Health Ethics.

References

- History Place (1977). World war two in Europe: The early days of Dachau. Retrieved July 28, 2008, from <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/ww2time.htm>
- Jewish Virtual Library (2008). Dachau. Retrieved July 27, 2008, from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/dachau.html>
- Mazal, H. (2007). The Dachau gas chambers. Retrieved July 27, 2008, from <http://www.holocaust-history.org/dachau-gas-chambers>
- Remember (2008). Medical experiments of the holocaust and Nazi Medicine. Retrieved July 27, 2008 from <http://remember.org/educate/medexp.html>.
- Scrap Book Pages. (2008). "Dachau Scrap Book." Retrieved July 27, 2008, from <http://scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapBook/experiments2.html>
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2008). The Doctors trial (the Medical Case of the subsequent Nuremberg proceedings). Retrieved July 27, 2008, from <http://www.ushmm.org/research/doctors/twoa.htm>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (2008). "The Holocaust." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 27, 2008, from <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/index.php?ModuleId=10005143>