

PM, THURSDAY, APRIL 26, 1945

# Report on Belsen Death Camp

*A detailed story of the infamous German concentration camp at Belsen by Patrick Gordon Walker of the news staff of the Luxembourg Radio was broadcast Tuesday to the U. S. A. from Luxembourg. Luxembourg Radio is regarded as the voice of Allied Supreme Headquarters. The broadcast was recorded and released to the press by the Office of War Information. An abbreviated text of the broadcast follows:*

*Reprinted from Yesterday's Late Edition*

This is John Peyser speaking from Luxembourg.



America, this is not a story. It has very little entertainment in it. This is a report of the nature of your enemy. I want you to listen to it whether it turns your stomach or not. These are things you must know of what has been going on under the Nazis for the last 12 years.

I am going to read to you the report of Patrick Gordon Walker on the concentration camp at Belsen.

Gordon Walker is not a war correspondent. He is a trained observer. He did not write a story. He took notes of what he saw and what he was told. He went to investigate, and these next words are his report:

I went to Belsen. It was a vast area surrounded by barbed wire. The whole thing was being guarded by Hungarian guards. They had been in the German Army and are now immediately and without hesitation serving us. They are saving us a large number of men for the time being. Outside the camp, which is amidst bushes, pines and heather, all fairly recently planted, were great notices in red letters: "Danger; Typhus."

We drove into what turned out to be a great training camp, a sort of an Aberdeen, where we found the officers and Oxfordshire Yeomanry. They began to tell us about the concentration camp.

Typhus broke out in the camp, and a truce was arranged so that we could take the camp over. The Germans originally had proposed that we should by-pass the camp. In the meanwhile, thousands and thousands of people would have died and been shot. We refused these terms, and demanded the withdrawal of the Germans and the disarmament of the SS guards. Some dozen SS men and women were left behind under the command of higher Stormfuehrer Kramer, who had been at Auschwitz. Apparently they had been told all sorts of fairy tales about the troops, that they could go on guarding, and that we would let them free and so forth.

## Inmates Regarded as Cattle

Sington, who had done a magnificent job of work, arrived with a few trucks and was met by Kramer who showed him around the camp. There were volleys of cheers all the way. People broke out of the compound to greet the British spearheads. Kramer seemed to expect us to be shocked by the things we saw. He had been the man who stood in the ovens at Auschwitz and picked out those to be burned at once.

He described the inmates of the camp as anti-social, useless people. He clearly regarded them as cattle. As we drove in, the SS opened fire from the towers on people who broke out of the compound to go and get at a potato field. This was stopped quickly.

We only had a handful of men so far, and the SS stayed there that night. The first night of liberty, many hundreds of people died of joy.

Next day some men of the Yeomanry arrived. The people crowded around them, kissing their hands and feet—and dying from weakness. Corpses in every stage of decay were lying around, piled up on top of each other in heaps. There were corpses in the compound in flocks. People were falling dead all around, people who were walking skeletons. One woman came up to a soldier who was guarding the milk store and doling the milk out to children, and begged for milk for her baby. The man took the baby and saw that it had been dead for days, black in the face and shrivelled up. The woman went on begging for milk. So he poured some on the dead lips. The mother then started to croon with joy and carried the baby off in triumph. She stumbled and fell dead in a few yards. I have this story and some others on records spoken by the men who saw them.

On the 16th, Kramer and the SS were arrested. Kramer was taken off and kept in the icebox with some stinking fish of the officers' home. He is now going back to the rear. The rest, men and women were kept under guard to save them from the inmates. The men were set to work shoveling up the corpses into lorries.

## Many Shoveled Into Mass Grave

About 35,000 corpses were reckoned, more actually than the living. Of the living, there were about 30,000.

The camp was so full because people had been brought here from East and West. Some people were brought from Nordhausen, a five-day journey, without food. Many had marched for two or three days. There was no food at all in the camp, a few piles of roots—amidst the piles of dead bodies. Some of the dead bodies were of people so hungry that though the roots were guarded by SS men they had tried to storm them and had been shot down then and there. There was no water, nothing but these roots and some boiled stinking carrots, enough for a few hundred people.

Men and women had fought for these raw, uncooked roots. Dead

OldMagazineArticles.com



# Belsen Death Camp

bodies, black and blue and bloated, and skeletons had been used as pillows by sick people. The day after we took over, seven block leaders, mostly Poles, were murdered by the inmates.

In one place, hundreds had been shoveled into a mass grave by bulldozers; in another, Hungarian soldiers were putting corpses into a grave that was 60 feet by 60 feet and 30 feet deep. It was almost half full.

Other and similar pits were being dug. Five thousand people had died since we got into the camp. People died before my eyes, scarcely human, moaning skeletons, many of them gone mad. Bodies were just piled up. Many had gashed wounds and bullet marks and terrible sores. One Englishman, who had lived in Ostend, was picked up half dead. It was found that he had a great bullet wound in his back. He could just speak. He had no idea when he had been shot. He must have been lying half unconscious when some SS man shot him as he was crawling about. This was quite common. I walked about the camp. Everywhere was the smell and odor of death. After a few hours you get used to it and don't notice it any more. People have typhus and dysentery.

## Life and Death Question of Chance

In one compound I went, I saw women standing up quite naked, washing among themselves. Nearby were piles of corpses. Other women suffering from dysentery were defecating in the open and then staggering back, half-dead, to their blocks. Some were lying groaning on the ground. One had reverted to the absolute primitive.

I went into the typhus ward, packed thick with people lying in dirty rags of blankets on the floor, groaning and moaning. By the door sat an English Tommy talking to the people and cheering them up. They couldn't understand what he said, and he was continually ladling milk out of a cauldron.

There are three main classes in the camp: The healthy who have managed to keep themselves decent, but nearly all of these had typhus; then there were the sick who were more or less cared for by their friends; then there was the vast underworld that had lost all self-respect, crawling around in rags, living in abominable squalor, defecating in the compound, often mad or half-mad. By the other prisoners they are called musulmen. It is these who are still dying like flies. They can hardly walk on their legs. Thousands still of these cannot be saved, and if they were, they would be in lunatic asylums for the short remainder of their pitiful lives.

I talked to two pretty sisters, Anita and Renata Lasker, nieces of Lasker the chess player. Renata had nearly died of typhus at Auschwitz. The inspection was made, every one was told to stand up. Those who could not stand. Her name was written down. She said:

"I'm the sister of one of the girls who play in the orchestra."

"Oh, that's all right then." And her name was crossed off.

Otherwise, she would have been dead in an hour. Only those who played in the orchestra or did similar work had some chance to survive. At Auschwitz the band was made to play at the station as the new batches of inmates arrived, and during the parades when those to be gassed and burned were picked out.

I met pretty young girls whose hair was one inch long. They all had their numbers tattooed on their left arm, a mark of honor they will wear all their lives.

## Woman Tells of Cannibalism

One of the most extraordinary things was the women and men—there were only a few—who had kept themselves decent and clean.

On the first day many had on powder and lipstick. It seems the SS stores had been located and looted and boots and clothes had been found. Hundreds of people came up to me with letters which I have taken and am sending back to London to be posted all over the world. Many have lost all their relatives. "My father and mother were burned. My sister was burned."

The first day I recorded the Lasker sisters. They had both helped French soldiers over the frontier. I also recorded Charlotte Gruen, a Berlin woman, and a Dutchman. I met the Jewish padre with the Second Army, and we recorded the first eve of the Sabbath service held in the camp. That evening I went back to the camp with the political officer. He took me to the women's block at the end of the camp. We talked for a while with a group of Polish women. They wanted to know about Yalta and the Lublin Committee. They all wanted to go to Palestine.

We then talked with a pretty French woman of 24. She had been beaten by the Gestapo and had spent several years in concentration camps. She had done resistance work. We talked in the open compound. In the middle was a pile of old papers and skeletons. Around us were the bodies of people who had died in the last three days. There were groaning and raving women lying around and every few minutes some woman groaning with typhus would stagger out and defecate there in the open. Where the French woman slept there were 10 healthy people and 50 sick and dying. She told us how she had seen some corpses dragged off on a German's command by the still living on ropes along the ground. Their heads were open where people had cut out their brains to eat. There had been cannibalism in the camp. The flesh, brains and livers of people who had died of typhus were eaten.



# Belsen Death Camp<sup>3</sup>

On Saturday, Apr. 21, I went to the camp early. We recorded another Jewish service indoors—the Sabbath Morning Service. The people had made the padre a little ice cake to welcome him. As I came along they sang *Sholem Aleichem—Welcome Unto You*. During the service and the reading of the traditional prayers for the dead all around women and men burst into tears and cried openly.

Then we collected the orchestra together. They had got their instruments from the old camp band. Some of them played very well. They loved old jazz and played such songs as *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* and *Alexander's Ragtime Band* and we sang them all. One woman who played the violin burst into tears when they played the record back to her. "I should be able to play. I have played before big audiences but I have forgotten how to play."

While we were walking in the camp one woman came up and begged for a cigaret. "I'll give you bread for it," and she showed me the loaf.

## Children Tell Stories of Horror

Then we went to the children's hut. The floors had been piled with corpses there had been no time to move. We collected a chorus of Russian girls from 12 to 14 and Dutch boys and girls from nine to 15. They sang songs. The Russian children were very impressive. Clean and quite big children, they had been looked after magnificently amidst starvation. They sang the songs they remembered from before captivity. They looked happy now. The Dutch children had been in camp a long time and were very skinny and pale. We stood with our backs to the corpses, out in the open amidst the pines and the birch trees near the wire fence running around the camp.

I talked afterwards to a little Dutch girl, Hedy, 16 years old, and her young brother. They had been 13 months in the camp. Their father and mother had worked in the workshops where people were driven and beaten and died in hordes. Their mother had to get up at 3 to try and get some food for her husband to eat while he worked. The father had gone to work one day with a scarf around his neck. The SS man in charge had, out of sheer fun, taken hold of the ends of the scarf and half-strangled him. The little girl's stories went on endlessly.

Their mothers and fathers had been taken away a month or so before. They were asking every officer they saw "How can we find out where our parents are?" The little girl said: "If I ever meet those SS again I'll kill them with my bare hands. They made us stand on parade, children from 3 upwards, for hours—hours on end in the snow."

I also recorded an interview with a Russian girl, aged 14. Both her parents had been killed. She was a sturdy, bright thing who had learned some German. It was late by now, about 8, beginning to get dark. I went along to the cells where the SS men and women were kept. They were so worn out that they were being given a day's rest so that more work could be got out of them. And there were now only four in a cell instead of 12. As we opened the cell door they all scrambled to attention. They had been gotten into a better frame of mind. I called out one of them, a fair-haired man of 35. There were guards with guns all around.

## Germans' Stories Recorded

I talked to the man very roughly, keeping him at attention. I told him he had very little chance of escaping execution as a war criminal but he could help us and that might help him. I wanted a record describing what he had seen in the camp he had been in, and sent him back to the cell to think things over. I called out another. He turned out to be a Romanian. I cursed him and sent him back.

I then called on a doctor who looked in wicked shape. His head was burning and his shirt was torn and he looked as if one of his arms were broken. He had been in Auschwitz as a doctor. His story was that he attended the inmates and besides he had conducted the experiments on women, deformed people and twins. He was of no use to me so I told him he hadn't long to live and sent him back. I called out the first man again. He was ready to talk. He only asked that he could do it far enough away so that his comrades could not hear. I took him outside and I recorded the interview.

Then I went to the women's cell and got out the overseer who had been in charge of the guards—a woman of 24, obstinate and calloused looking, with a hard, brutal mouth.

I kept her there, standing at attention, and started by telling her that she was a war criminal, that her uniform was a disgrace, and then I asked her questions. She had been at Auschwitz—put in charge of the camp.

"It was a model camp—cinemas, and so forth," she said.

I laughed out loud. "Do you expect us to believe that the SS spends money on Jews?"

She kept on saying she was popular with the prisoners. "If we let you out there, away from these men, you wouldn't live two minutes," I said. "Look at the guards we have to keep to protect you."

She admitted that she had helped to choose the women to be gassed at Auschwitz.

"Do you know that every prisoner here says that the SS women are even crueller than the men?"

"That's not true," she answered.

"How many women have you beaten yourself? Did you have a whip?"



# Belsen Death Camp<sup>4</sup>

"I never had a whip in my hand."

"Well then, with the shining exception of yourself, who are so kind and popular, how many women did the other SS women beat?"

"I don't really know. When a woman deserved it, I beat them, but only with my hands."

And then followed a long silence.

"There is a way in which you might be able to help us, and if you help us it might possibly help you." And then I went on to say I wanted a record of her description of the camp. There then ensued a long argument in which she tried to evade questions by asking me questions. At one time she said, "If I don't do what you ask, you'll shoot me—if I do it my own side will shoot me."

"My God," I replied, "your side doesn't exist anymore. Do you know how much of Germany we occupy? Leipzig, Regensburg, Frankfort-on-Oder, the suburbs of Berlin."

## Fascist Girl Bargains to the Last

I asked one of the soldiers for a newspaper. He produced a four-day old one and I showed it to her. She studied it for a long time. It had a marked effect on her. Then she began to plead to be allowed some time to consider.

"Five minutes."

"Could I speak tomorrow morning? My voice is weak and hoarse. I'm so excited."

"You speak now or not at all. I can get some other woman to speak then, I won't want you."

"If I do as you say, can I have a cigaret? And I would like some water."

I sent one of the soldiers for a glass of water and I let her sit down. She had been standing at attention all this time, about a half-hour. She now mainly pleaded to be allowed to wait until the morning. "I'm still a human being."

"Possibly."

"I am a human being and I appeal to you as a human being. You're stronger and we are the weaker. I am a woman."

Then she said she had heard that we had concentration camps in England. I got very angry and told her how we treated our Germans and our Fascists. Then she asked me what questions she would have to answer.

"Your name, your age, your service in the SS, your description of things in this camp."

## This Is the Enemy

Then she began to get hysterical. She drank water and looked at the cigaret I had put in front of her. She kept on pulling her hands and her hair and saying "What am I to do. I have been present at many interrogations and I know it won't do me any good whatever to do either way."

"It may do you good, but I make no promises. But it's a matter of perfect indifference to me whether it's you or some other woman who speaks. A man has already spoken for me."

"That I can well believe."

She was far pluckier than the man had been. She constantly looked at me, looked me straight in the eye. She sometimes set her mouth in an obstinate, cruel line. She probably expected to be beaten. Then I suddenly became very firm.

"You must answer yes or no in one minute."

A long silence, then, "Yes, if you only ask me those questions."

So I got the microphone and she went through her interview, answering the questions in a low tense voice. At the end I gave her the cigaret.

Men were hung for hours at a time, suspended by their arms, hands tied behind their back in Belsen. Beatings in workshops were continuous, and there were many deaths there. Just before I left the camp a crematorium was discovered. A story of Auschwitz was told to me by Helen—and her last name, she didn't remember. She was a Czechoslovak.

When the women were given the chance to go and work elsewhere in the work zones like Hamburg, mothers with children, were, in fact, given the choice between their lives and their children's. Children could not be taken along. Many preferred to stay with their children and face certain death. Some decided to leave their children. But it got around amongst the 6-year-old children that if they were left there they would at once be gassed. There were terrible scenes between children and their mothers. One child was so angry that though the mother changed her mind and stayed and died, the child would not talk to her.

The next morning I left this hell-hole, this camp. As I left, I had myself deloused and my recording truck as well. To you at home, this is one camp. There are many more. This is what you are fighting. None of this is propaganda. This is the plain and simple truth.

PM

OldMagazineArticles.com