

-RG 01.12.01

Walter Schaefer

April 9, 1945
Germany

Dear Mom and Dad,

This afternoon I had a rather shocking experience. We got word that there was a concentration camp about ten miles from here and they said that it was really something to see, so we loaded a couple of trucks and took for there.

It's rather hard to describe something like that because you really have to see it to believe it. I know that I'll never forget it. It was a large camp and someone said that it contained fifteen thousand. They were all civilians, Poles, Russians, Serbians, Czechs, French, Italians, and every other country that they conquered. It was near Hitler's super-highway, which is what the prisoners worked on. The camp itself was hidden near a woods about three miles from the nearest paved road and contained a number of low wooden buildings, where the prisoners lived, and also a crematory in the center of the camp. But that isn't really what I want to describe. As we entered the camp, we saw about thirty prisoners sprawled on the ground, all shot through the head. They were lying in grotesque postures the way people do when they die suddenly. That was bad, but I saw something that was far more sickening. As I mentioned above, there was a crematory in the center of the camp with an oven equipped to burn two bodies at a time. In back of the crematory was a shed with 45 to 50 bodies stacked up on one side. They were all naked and stacked one on top of the other like a pile of wood, and all had evidently starved to death. They were nothing but skin-covered bones and their thighs were no thicker than their ankles. Their hip-bones stuck out four inches ~~from~~ on either side of their stomachs, and none could have weighed more than sixty pounds. They didn't take up much more room than a dozen sacks of potatoes would have.

As bad as that was there was still some ^{thing} more horrible. In a woods about a mile from the camp were stacks of burned bodies. Alongside was a large pit with more bodies, and all around were other places with arms and legs sticking out of the ground where they didn't do such a good job of burying.

The whole thing was gruesome beyond words and while I had heard and read about concentration camps, this one left me cold. There were still a few of the former prisoners wandering around and when I started to talk to one in German several others came over, glad that someone could understand them, so they could tell the real story. They said that they were Poles and had been at this camp only two weeks, but had been in Germany for four years at various other camps. This camp contained a collection of people from all over Europe, but especially from Poland and Russia. It seems that the Germans had an especial desire to exterminate Poles and Russians. They worked all day long building the super-highway, sometimes marching five to ten miles each way to work. They were fed about a liter of soup and a piece of black bread once a day, beaten continually, slept on the floor in the barracks without light or heat.

I asked him about all of the burned bodies in the woods and he said that the day before the Americans arrived here the German guards had orders to exterminate everyone in the camp, and so they were marched out to the woods and killed in groups, with the second group disposing of the first, and the third group disposing of the second and so on until they were all killed. But he said that the few who were still alive and the ones who lay around dead in the center of the camp had been out on some work detail that day and had been brought back to camp too late to be taken along. And in their haste to get away before the American troops came, the guards shot the ones that were left but didn't have time to search the camp for stragglers.

He named other concentration camps, large ones where they killed fifty thousand and more. It was all a part of the Nazi plan to exterminate millions of Europeans, but to use them as slave labor first and let them die of overwork and starvation. Even the ones I was talking to were so weak that they had to walk with canes or crutches. There was one lying on the ground in the sun and he was too weak to get up by himself. I gave them a pack of cigarettes before I left and they were overjoyed.

That's the end of the story, and not a very nice one. The only thing that burns me up is that the Germans will never get what's coming to them. They are surrendering by the thousands and get the treatment that we do. Probably the same guards that run the concentration camps are somewhere in an American PW camp waiting for a boat to go to the States.

I know that the people back in the States have no idea what's happening over here and maybe if you would care to have this letter printed in the newspapers it would do some good, I don't know.

I'm sending this Blue Envelope because I know that our own officers wouldn't approve of it and hope that it gets through. The Germans seem to be in their death throes, but I suppose you know that the Nazi leaders are prepared to fight to the last man. There're ready to go to any lengths. I hope the Russians beat us to Berlin.

That's all for now. Will write more soon and perhaps my next letter will be a little more cheerful.

Love,
Barry