

# Letters from Dachau

By Clarice Wilsey

On June 1, 1945, my father wrote my mother these words from Dachau, a recently liberated concentration camp in Nazi Germany:

**“Please darlin’, don’t feel you have to rant on paper about Dachau—I know you ‘see and know it for what it [is] & that’s all I care—all I ask is that you ‘instill’ it into as many thousand others as you can—till maybe we can get millions to ‘see it.’”**

For over five weeks, my father, Dr. David Brown Wilsey, provided medical treatment as a United States Army physician for the tens of thousands of survivors at Dachau who had suffered starvation, disease, torture, beatings, and exhaustion from forced labor while imprisoned by the Nazis. He saw the bodies of the tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners who did not survive as well. My father witnessed the Holocaust first hand at Dachau and was deeply affected and traumatized by the experience. In June of 1945, he knew that the world needed to know about what had happened at Dachau and other Nazi concentration camps. He asked my mother to tell thousands so that millions could one day “see it,” but after the war ended he himself could never talk about what happened. Reliving the experience was too difficult for him. Now that he has passed away, I believe it is my responsibility as his daughter to tell the world about what my father saw.

My name is Clarice Wilsey and I first learned about what my father saw at Dachau in 1953 when I was only six years old. My family had just moved to a new house in Spokane, Washington, and many of our belongings were still packed up in boxes. While helping unpack, I found horrifying photos of dead bodies at Dachau. I was scared and confused. I’d never encountered death before and didn’t know anything about what had happened during the Holocaust. Why did my father have such horrible photographs? When I asked my dad what the photos were, he just grabbed them out of my hand and took away the box I found them in. I remember him yelling at me, saying that “a little girl shouldn’t see this” and then storming out of the room. I sat there stunned, not sure of what I had seen. I never forgot those photos.

My father never explained the meaning of those photos to me while he was alive. My family and I learned to not ask or talk about the war or the Holocaust while around him. It seemed that my parents had taken a mutual vow of silence. The only time my dad ever spoke about the war at all was when he learned about Holocaust denial. I remember that whenever my father saw a television program discussing people who denied the Holocaust, he would fly into a rage and yell, “I know! I was there!” But if my family asked him any questions, he would reply, “you don’t need to know about this.”

In the meantime, I grew up. When I turned 18, I went to college and graduated from the University of Washington. I later earned a Master’s degree in counseling from Eastern Kentucky University and started my

45-year career as a university-level faculty and counselor. I worked at several different universities around the country, but eventually moved to Eugene and became the Associate Director and Senior Career Counselor at the University of Oregon.

In 1996, my father died at the age of 82. We had never talked about the war or the photos I saw when I was six. Twelve years later in 2008, my mom died at the age of 92. The following year, my siblings and I sold my parents' house. Together we began to sort through and pack up their belongings. Suddenly I heard my brother yell from the attic. He brought down an old trunk, opened it up, and pulled out a large Nazi flag. My sister and I cried when we saw it. Why did our father have such a horrible symbol of hate? Besides the flag, we found several other boxes. Each of us grabbed a random one.

Months later, at my house on a rainy day, I opened the box that I took from the trunk. Inside, I was surprised to rediscover the same horrible photos of Dachau I saw when I was six years old. I was amazed. I had thought I would never see those photographs again. Even more surprising than the photos, however, were the hundreds of letters that I found inside the box. The letters were all in excellent condition and ordered chronologically by date. I read some of them and realized that they had been written by my father to my mother, Emily Wilsey, during the war! Somehow, I remembered that Dachau was liberated in the spring of 1945. I turned to those dates in the box and started reading the letters. Soon, I was crying. The nightmarish descriptions of Dachau written by my father were awful to read. I put the letters away and didn't look at them for several more years.

Eventually, however, I opened the box up again. I read all of the over 300 letters inside. After decades of silence and the deaths of both my parents, I finally learned what my father went through during the war. Using these letters, I can finally share his story.

My father was born on July 11, 1914, in a small town called Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. His mother, Lilian Gale Wilsey, was Wisconsin's first female dentist and his father, Joseph Wilsey, owned and operated a men's clothing store. My father was forced to become independent at an early age. When my dad was only 12, his father passed away and his mother was hospitalized shortly thereafter. With his father gone and his mother unable to care for him, my dad was enrolled in St. John's Military Academy—a boarding school. He graduated from St. John's at the age of 16 and in 1931 he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1934, while my dad was away at college, his mother died. At 20 years old, my father had already lost both his parents.

My father met my mother while they were both students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My mother was studying physical therapy at the time and shared my father's devout Episcopalian denomination, a love of sports, and a desire to heal people. They started dating. Soon enough, they fell in love.

In 1939, after four years together, my parents relationship became long distance while they each moved away to continue their studies. This is when their letter writing practice began. For years, my parents wrote each other letters to maintain their relationship while apart.

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the United States by bombing the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The following day, the United States declared war on Japan. Then, on December 11, Germany declared war on the United States. The United States had formally entered into the Second World War. Although medical professionals like my father were exempt from the military draft, they were badly needed. With this in mind and the war looming, my parents decided he should volunteer for service, but not before getting married. My parents were married in 1943, and he enlisted on February 29, 1944. My mother quickly got pregnant with their first child, my older brother Terry, who was born in August 1944. My father took a short leave to be with his newborn son. Then, after an intensive three-month training related to war casualties, he was deployed to Europe as part of the Medical Corp of the United States Army in November 1944 where he was assigned to the 116th Evacuation Hospital.

In the winter of 1944, Nazi Germany launched a surprise offensive against Allied forces in Northern France, Belgium and Luxembourg. Germany hoped to reach a peace settlement with the Western Allies and turn its full attention to the East to finish its fight against the Soviet Union. In reality, the plan made little sense. Germany was suffering heavy losses from fighting the Soviet Union and lacked the soldiers and resources needed to launch such a large offensive in the West. Therefore, when Germany attacked, American forces were caught off guard and unprepared. As a result, from December 1944 to January 1945, my father and the rest of the 116<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital faced a surge of patients during the ensuing battle. The Battle of the Bulge, as it eventually came to be known, would ultimately be the bloodiest battle for the American military in all of the Second World War.

My dad worked as an anesthetist, a person who administered pain relieving and sedative drugs to patients, usually soldiers, who needed surgery. His job was to administer just enough anesthesia so that the surgery could be completed safely without the patient waking up, but not so much that the patient could overdose and potentially die. Today, modern anesthesiologists operate with special equipment that closely monitors the patient's intake of anesthesia, letting the doctor know if a patient needs more or less of a drug. By contrast, anesthetists in the Second World War lacked such sophisticated equipment. Incredibly, my father used only his fingers to check his patient's pulse and decided to increase or decrease the dose of anesthesia based on how the drugs affected the patient's heart rate.

Due to a shortage of anesthetists in the American army, my dad often had to treat more patients than he could be reasonably expected to handle. In a letter to my mother, he explained that he positioned his patients' beds around himself like the spokes on a wheel. This allowed him to care for up to seven patients at the same time! My father was awarded the Bronze Star for developing this unique technique to manage the extraordinarily large patient loads.

Besides administering anesthesia, he also had to assist in completing actual surgeries and providing general medical care. According to the testimony in his letters, my father's unit was perpetually understaffed and often lacked necessary medical supplies and equipment as well as proper lighting. Surgeons sometimes had to operate with flashlights!

By the end of January 1945, the Battle of the Bulge was over and my father likely helped save the lives of hundreds of wounded soldiers, including some Nazi soldiers. Allied forces had successfully repelled the German attack and soon they were back on the offensive. My father was constantly on the move as his hospital unit chased after the front lines while the Allies raced into Germany. For the next few months, he often complained to my mother that his mail was not arriving on time. Every time the hospital moved to a new location, the mail would have to be re-routed and, as a result, letters often arrived late or went missing. My father began heading his letters with the phrase “Somewhere in Germany” or “Somewhere else in Germany” just in case the letters were intercepted, so as not to reveal his hospital’s location.

After several more months of fighting, the United States Seventh Army reached the town of Dachau in southern Germany. The soldiers had no idea the horrors they were about to witness.

Dachau was the first concentration camp established in Nazi Germany in March of 1933, just weeks after Hitler’s rise to power. Dachau was initially established to hold political prisoners—dissidents and opponents of the Nazi regime. It was soon expanded to a slave labor camp where Jews, Romani, and other targets of the Nazi persecution were imprisoned and murdered. These prisoners, especially the Jewish ones, were routinely forced to work to the point of total exhaustion while being given hardly any food at all. Disease was rampant throughout the camp and the prisoners were housed in filthy, overcrowded barracks. Prisoners did not receive any medical treatment if they got sick and many died of disease or as a result of beatings and starvation. During its 12 years of operation, more than 30,000 deaths were documented at Dachau; however, many more were never recorded.

As the Seventh Army neared Dachau in the spring of 1945, many of the killing centers, like Majdanek and Auschwitz, had already been liberated by the Soviet Union. The first concentration camp liberated by United States forces was Ohrduf on April 4, 1945. On April 12, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and General George S. Patton toured the recently liberated camp of Ohrduf and were horrified by what they found. The following week, Eisenhower sent a request to Washington D.C. asking to send members of Congress and journalists to see firsthand the horrors of the camp.

In an attempt to hide further evidence of their crimes, the Nazis tried to evacuate and destroy parts of the camps. As Allied forces neared Dachau, Nazis forced some of the prisoners to march to other nearby labor camps. These marches killed so many people that they became known as “death marches.”

On April 29, 1945, my father aided in the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp. Alongside the rest of the United States Seventh Army, my father found the gruesome evidence of the Nazi genocide, including the many dead bodies. The sight traumatized him for the rest of his life. Some 30,000 prisoners at Dachau had survived, but they were all badly malnourished and many were suffering from deadly diseases like typhus and tuberculosis. They were in desperate need of medical attention. But when the Seventh Army first arrived, my father was one of only 28 doctors present. They were quickly overwhelmed by the large number of patients who needed their attention. Eventually, the number of Allied doctors at Dachau would grow to 78,

but this was still hardly sufficient. On May 8, 1945, my father wrote to my mother about what it was like in the recently liberated camp:

**“Emily, we are sweating, stinking, ‘existing’ in The-Hell-On-Earth-DACHAU! [Let every word of Jan or Dec Readers Digest bore-through the middle of your guts—AND MULTIPLY it 100 fold].<sup>1</sup> Dearest, the atrocity reports are true—and more! For over 8 days I’ve seen-lived-smelled-‘existed’ it as one of 78 doctors to try to correct the medical-horror-component of The-Hell- On-Earth.”**

Despite the best efforts of my father and the other Allied doctors, many of the survivors continued to die of disease after liberation. In particular, typhus—a disease spread by fleas that causes fever, cough, and body aches—was rampant. Without treatment, typhus can be deadly, especially for the weak and malnourished people imprisoned at Dachau. Some also died from eating too much, as they couldn’t properly digest their food. Their bodies needed to slowly get used to the process of digesting normal sized meals again. This was difficult for survivors to understand and sometimes caused conflict between the survivors and physicians.

Dachau was transformed into a hospital with eleven different wards, each with 1,200 beds. There were about 175 patients for every one doctor at Dachau after the liberation. The tasks of setting up these hospital wards and organizing a quarantine for people with typhus were made more difficult when Allied leadership ordered the Seventh Army to not significantly alter the camp at Dachau. They needed to preserve the evidence of mass murder for the upcoming trials against Nazi leaders. As a result, the hospital wards had to be set up with the same infrastructure that existed at Dachau before the liberation. Overcrowding continued to be a problem. Nevertheless, the doctors administered thousands of typhus vaccines and eased the survivors back into a normal diet by incrementally increasing their food rations.

It was dangerous work as the doctors put themselves at serious risk of catching typhus themselves. While at Dachau, my father mentioned in a letter to my mother that half of all the army doctors who treated typhus during the First World War eventually died of the disease. By 1945, medicine had improved enough to provide doctors treating typhus with more safety, but my father was clearly still aware of the risks. Treating typhus and vaccinating survivors were my father’s main tasks after the liberation. Even though he was trained as an anesthetist, my father rarely administered anesthesia while at Dachau because most of his patients could not have survived surgery even if they needed it.

On May 8, 1945, the last of the Nazi German forces surrendered. The day would be forever immortalized as “Victory in Europe Day” or simply “VE Day.” My father had been at Dachau for just over a week when the war in Europe finally ended. That day, he wrote the following to my mother about all the civilian and military leaders who were coming to Dachau after the surrender to see the evidence of atrocities, including future American president, Dwight Eisenhower:

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<sup>1</sup> Bracketed text is part of the original.

**“Why! the horror is so unbelievable that they flew Congressmen to see it the day we came. That famous W. DC woman correspondent (“Life” mag.) ate ċ<sup>2</sup> is noon to see it. Ambassador Caffery (to France) saw it today. Eisenhower is expected any minute. All Europe’s biggest Cabinet, Ambassadors, news-reelers, etc have been or are here to MAKE SEEING↔BELIEVING.”**

He would continue to treat the Holocaust survivors at Dachau for another month. During that time, he helped save the lives of thousands of survivors. Still, he struggled with life in the camp. “The-Hell-On-Earth Dachau,” as he often called it in his letters, was a nightmarish place to live given what had happened there. On May 17, he wrote to my mother that part of him hoped the Allies would just destroy Dachau after treating the survivors:

**“I believe the rumor will materialize that they burn Dachau to the ground! Its funny but we all just sorta hopefully wait ċ<sup>3</sup> fiendish (?) glee for that moment—to see this dastardly place just roaring in flames.”**

In June of 1945, my father left Dachau as a changed man. He remained stationed in Europe for the summer, but worried that he’d be sent to fight in the Pacific until the Japanese surrendered in August of 1945. The war was finally over but my father nevertheless remained in the military for another five months until he was discharged in February of 1946. I was born the following year in 1947 and soon after my parents settled our family in Spokane, Washington. The war had disrupted my parents’ lives, but it finally seemed like we were able to live like a normal, happy family.

The war had changed my father; it traumatized him. When I was growing up, I had no idea what my father had experienced during the war. I didn’t understand that some of his behaviors were caused by his symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and moral injury.

Discovering his letters finally provided clarity for me in understanding why my father acted the way he did after the war. Understanding the trauma he faced opened my eyes to the ways that my father changed during his deployment. While I, of course, never knew my father during the pre-war years before I was born, reading the letters he wrote at the beginning of his deployment in 1944 made me realize that he had been a different man before the Battle of the Bulge and Dachau. I realized too that because of his silence, no one had ever heard about his experiences at war. I decided I would now be his voice—to tell of the events that he could never bring himself to talk about. I joined the Speaker’s Bureau for the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education in Portland, Oregon, and for the Holocaust Center for Humanity in Seattle, Washington, and began giving talks about my dad’s connection to the Holocaust. In 2020, with the help of Bob Welch, I wrote a book about my father’s experiences called *Letters from Dachau: A father’s witness of war, a daughter’s dream of peace*. I will continue to live out my father’s mission by telling his story to as many thousands as I can so that maybe one day, millions will “see it.”

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<sup>2,3</sup> ċ is a medical abbreviation for “with.”