

# The Men from Dachau

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We saw them first that day at the railroad depot in Munich, Germany. They were a group of about 200 assembled, as we were, to wait for a meager cup of barley or rutabaga soup for lunch. We were a rag-tag bunch and even though we were all American prisoners of the Germans, we were dressed in an assortment of clothing acquired by trading. I had a French overcoat and a British battle jacket, similar to the Eisenhower jacket later adopted by the US Army. Other members of our work group wore the clothing they had worn at the time of their capture by the Germans.

The strange group wore nothing but those striped pajamas—tops and bottoms—and were obviously prisoners of the Germans. They were a sorry looking bunch, standing shivering in the cold—the temperature hovering just above freezing. We were thin, but they appeared to be hardly anything but skin and bones. They were obviously convicts as they were wearing the attire for felons which is, perhaps, universal—shirts and pants of striped material. The difference on that miserably cold day in Munich was that they had no other clothing—no coats or jackets. Their shoes, as I recall, were of the make-shift variety.

We were more or less adequately clothed as, when captured, we were well equipped with wool pants and shirts. Our feet were shod with well-designed, rugged Army boots. For jackets, most of us wore standard field jackets, but no overcoats. When we were on line, we left our heavier equipment and clothing, such as overcoats, to the rear in duffel bags to be used only if the weather called for it.

It was clear to us that the men in the striped pajamas were in bad shape. They stood clustered and tightly packed awaiting, as we, the noon rations of thin soup. They were guarded by younger guards. Our guards, typically, were older men who may have served in World War I, or had served in this war (WWII) and had been wounded. Guard duty for a German soldier at Stalag VIIA would have been considered easy duty. The thin men in the striped pajamas were guarded not only by younger guards, but by dogs. The dogs were of the standard German shepherd variety. They were beautiful dogs and well trained as they stood or sat at the end of their leashes each being held by a single German guard. The guard dogs appeared to be oblivious to the events around them.

We, the American POWs, had been loaded into the European boxcars, which were designed for 40 men or 8 horses, before dawn that morning for the trip into Munich, a distance of perhaps 25 miles. Instead of the allotted 40 men per box car, we were crowded with about 100 men per car, as the Germans were not overly concerned about our comfort. The crowding resulted in most of us having to stand for the trip. The upside of the bunching of men was we could stay warmer with our body heat being shared by others. It was cold that winter of 1944–45, the temperature usually being below freezing during the days of January and February.

We had been clearing some debris from the streets within walking distance of the main railroad yards all morning and, if plans were not changed by an air raid, we would return to do the same that afternoon. Then late in the day, we would be marched back to the railroad marshaling yards in Munich to board the 40 & 8 boxcars for the trip back to Stalag VIIA located at Moosburg. This was a routine that was followed six days a week if transportation was available. Many days, the air raids from the night before by the British Royal Air Force would damage the rail system to make the traffic come to a stand still, giving the residents of Stalag VIIA a day off.

The men in the striped suits stood patiently, as did we—they silently, we talking softly among ourselves and staring at the strange-looking group who were assembled across the station's platform. The soup arrived, each pot being carried by two German army men. We, being a smaller group had one large pot and the men in the striped pajamas had two pots. The bearers of the pots sat them down, ours near our group and the other two pots across the platform for the striped-pajama-clad men.

As the two pots were lowered to the ground and the bearers stepped away, the men in the striped pajamas rushed en masse to their pots. It is hard to describe in words this scene. It was as if a command had been given, but there was no command given as the group moved as one, rushing to the two pots sitting on the concrete platform. We were hungry, for sure, but seeing the other group rushing the soup kettles, we suddenly realized how starved the group must have been.

The German guards reacted quickly to the exodus of the men toward the pots, releasing the German shepherds, who ran snarling and snapping toward the men. They retreated quickly, moving in a wave away from the pots, at which time the guards ordered the dogs to cease.

Perhaps the unison movement of the striped-clothed group of men is best described as being like the movement of a ripened wheat field, the stalks swaying in the wind—the air moving the entire field in one direction and quickly changing to the other direction if the wind changes. The group moved as a field of wheat would move in the wind—moved not by the wind, but by the guard dogs.

We knew not who these men were or the reason that they were prisoners. We thought they must be felons of the worst type: murderers, rapists, bank robbers, and such. Never in the naiveté of our nineteen- and twenty-year-old minds could you have convinced us that the Germans had a policy of eliminating an entire race of people. We found out only later, after returning home to the States, that these were prisoners from one of the famous concentration camps—Dachau.

Had we known, the only way we could have helped these poor wretches would have been to offer our soup, which would not have been allowed, I feel sure.

Dachau was located less than 10 miles northwest of Munich. Moosburg, the site of Stalag VIIA, was located about 25 miles to the northeast of Munich, in Southern Germany. After the American forces overran Dachau and released the prisoners, one report related that some seventy-five German guards were lined up and shot by the Americans in an emotional setting.

War is not pretty and many of the incidents that occurred during WWII should never be forgotten. That day at the railroad station in Munich, in the dead of winter of 1944–45, was not pretty and it was a vision which is forever etched in my mind.

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