



Memory & Action

75 Years Ago, with Mixed Emotions, a Liberator Confided in His Mother



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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In April and May 1945, Allied forces liberated thousands of prisoners from Nazi concentration camps. Soldiers confronted evidence of the Holocaust firsthand and wrote home with their shocked and horrified observations.

Colin McCrae, a soldier in the United States Army, wrote to his mother two days after the end of World War II in Europe. He describes what he witnessed in the recently liberated Dachau concentration camp, the V-E Day news, and the reaction of a Displaced Person who had recently been liberated from forced labor. The letter, part of the Museum's collection, has been transcribed below exactly as McCrae wrote it.



A liberator views Museum collections. Michael Priest Photography for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum

May 10, 1945

Dear Mother:

This is the first letter for a long time isn't it, but it seems that the heat is off so to speak and am actually getting a little time to myself again.

Have had a very interesting time of it recently as you can well imagine. Thought you might be interested in what I was doing at the moment the war ended and so forth. It actually ended for the greater part for us at noon on the 6th, when Army Group G decided they weren't going to win after all. At that particular moment, for the benefit of history, I was sitting in a jeep beside the road about 25 miles east of Salzburg eating a combination of breakfast and lunch consisting of Swiss cheese, dill pickles, pumpernickel, Norwegian sardines and beer — all captured. It was quite warm and the road

was dusty, filled with German troops on foot, with horse transport and motor convoys proceeding under their own power and with a sprinkling of guides to the POW cages at Munich. Some of them even had the amazing gall to try to bum a cigarette from me as they went by. They seemed neither depressed or happy and it looked as though they were on a routine maneuver.

C:O:P:Y

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After Churchill's speech designating V-E Day, and the radio broadcast the bells ringing, I returned to a little work I was doing and passed the Münster Cathedral. The bells were ringing there too. Hoped they would play the carillon but they simply rang peals for about half an hour. The Cathedral is a beautiful thing with what is claimed to be the highest spire in the world - 162 meters of the Gothic lines soaring straight up. Fortunately it was only slightly damaged altho' the city and the Danube bridges are a shambles. The civilians are obviously relieved that it's all over altho not particularly overjoyed for obvious reasons.

The American soldier's reaction to all this was pretty much matter-of-fact, due I think to the fact all the surrenders took place over a course of days rather than suddenly. Also everyone I think had and still has the question in the back of his mind: Is the war really over for me or is this only part of it with the Far East to come? Nobody knows the answer to that one and am sure it had quite a sobering effect. Of course there were a lot of headaches the next day and a few AA guns fired and a lot of flares shot off but it really didn't have much of the appearance of a celebration.

The repatriated Allied POW's took it all according to their situation and comprehension of the situation. Americans and British cheered and wept as they liked. The Poles and Russians got solemnly drunk and danced with the Polish and Russian girls which are all over the place. The weirder variety of Russian (the Czerbajans and the rest) not knowing what it was all about, continued about their business of scratching and trying to find a pair of shoes.

The French were about the only ones who really went crazy, and that was something to see - from a distance. It involved burning a couple of towns to the ground in addition to other interesting activities.

The so-called "slave-labor" or as we call them D.P.'s (Displaced Persons) also took things according to their status. Most showed very little

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The so-called “slave-labor” or as we call them D.P.’s (Displaced Persons) also took things according to their status. Most showed very little excitement. Couldn’t quite understand it until I asked a Pole what the trouble was, and when she was going home. She answered quite reasonably: What home? She went further to say that so far as she was concerned she was going to stay right in Germany as long as the Russians were in Poland. Don’t know if this is the general reaction or not but it was a viewpoint I hadn’t heard before.

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The whole situation was a great contrast to the Camp at Dachau which I had visited a few days before. Anything you hear about that place you can believe - it's not propaganda. The activities in other camps were pretty well discussed in a recent Time, and they had it at Dachau too, in spades. Never in my life saw or dreamed of so much concentrated human misery. The spectacle of 25 to 30 thousand people dying and knowing they are dying, not daring to speak to each other, still is a very depressing thing. Couldn't get out of there fast enough.

The damndest part of it is that the Germans in Dachau know all about the camp. It is separated from the town by the width of a city street, only, and the trains carrying in prisoners and the dead passed right through town. Can tell you truthfully that I saw German housewives going shopping for a loaf of bread walk fastidiously around bodies from the train that was on the siding when we captured the place. They were not half as perturbed as I was. The camp is of course not a concentration camp but an extermination camp, and the story of the shower-room that turns into a lethal chamber is absolutely true. The crematorium is still going full blast - these people were scheduled to die and the preparations were so efficient from the standpoint of disease and starvation there isn't much that can be done about it. It's just like any big business - you can't stop it just by pressing a button: the wheels continue to turn for quite a while. Don't understand how anybody ever escaped from there - all the devices to keep people in are there - walls, barbed wire, machine gun emplacements, electrically charged wire, dogs, guards and all the rest. Quite a place - and run by Germans, with the knowledge of Germans, under German approval and I think only possible for Germans with full premeditation and planning.

Suppose you are wondering when if ever I shall be home. Naturally, I don't know the answer to that or whether it involves anything more than a short leave if I am able to come. However, the situation seems to be that I have an A-1 priority for leave at home. What that means in effect remains to be seen, but will keep you posted as soon as some reasonably accurate information is available.

Meanwhile seem to be in one piece and in good health, which is a lot more than I counted on 3 years ago this time. Hope you and Dad are in the best of health.

Love to both of you,

Colin.

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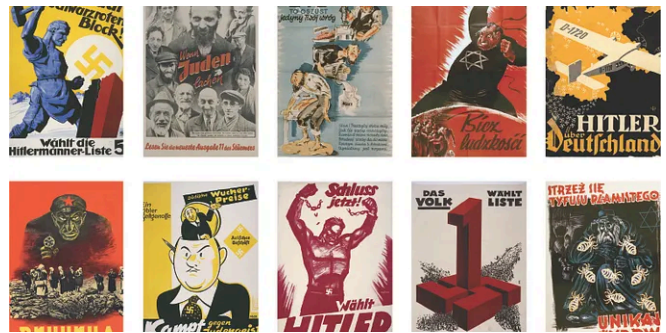
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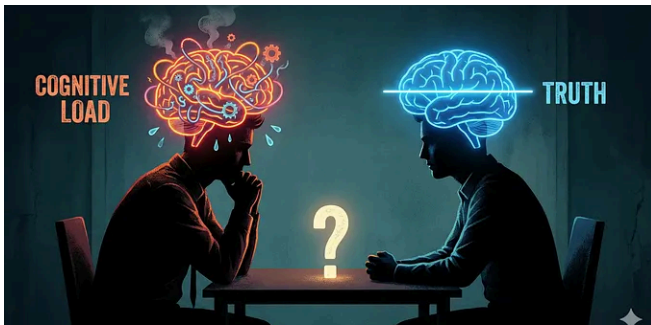
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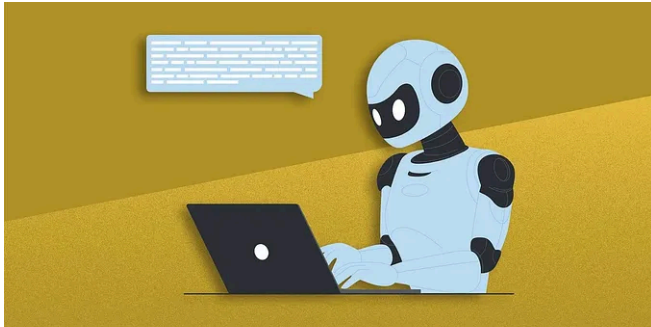


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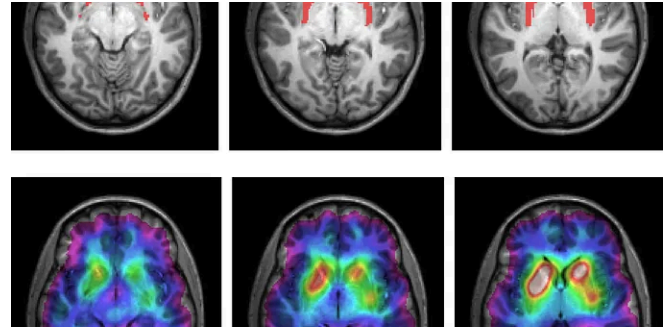
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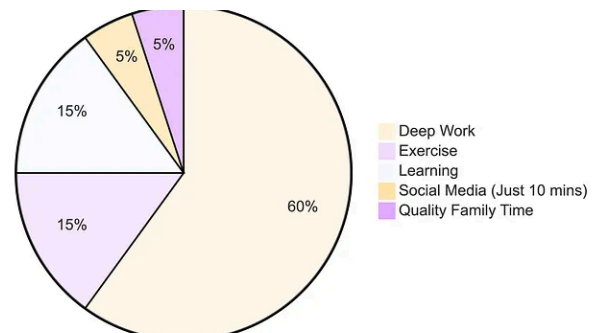


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