From the Testimony of Edward R. Murrow about the Liberation of Buchenwald

A description by an American journalist of the liberation of Buchenwald Camp

Before we hear each of the panelists speak in turn, however, we have a very special opportunity to hear something that is unique and I am very pleased to be able to introduce to you Mr. Fred W. Friendly, who is going to present it, introduce it for you. Mr. Friendly was himself a war correspondent who witnessed the liberation of Mauthausen. After the war he became an executive with CBS News, then the President of CBS News, and now serves as the Edward R. Murrow Professor of Journalism at the Columbia University School of Journalism. Mr. Friendly is also a member of the American delegation. Mr. Fred W. Friendly.

Thank you. I pondered for months after this invitation about what of those events of April 1945 that I lived through that I could share with you. And although I have a journalist's appetite to hear myself speak, I'm not going to speak. I'm going to play you a tape spoken by a man who died sixteen years ago and who made this report from Buchenwald in 1945. His name was Edward R. Murrow. I was his junior partner. The day that we went into Mauthausen in Austria, almost the day, he went in to Buchenwald. He was six years older than I was. We each filed reports and those among you, among us who are young will want to remember that there were three kinds of information that came out of that war. Official information. Censored information. Every war correspondent had to file his copy, whether it was Murrow on a rooftop at the BBC or whether it was one of my colleagues on a bombing mission - it had to be read by a censor. And then there was free information, which as far as mass communications could not exist. It was a declared war .

I want Edward R. Murrow's tape, which I play every year to students at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, to speak for itself. I call it the best piece of television journalism ever done and obviously, there are no pictures.

You may wish to close your eyes as you listen to part of it for your mind's eye will transport you to Buchenwald swifter and with more accuracy than any television camera, electronic or film could ever do. It runs about nineteen minutes - it won't bore you. I would warn you that because we had no satellites in those days, no cable in those days - it was shortwave - the first three or four minutes may be a little difficult for you to hear - you will hear the carrier signal and the interference. Take my word for it - put up with it, it's worth the reward.

One personal note - when I went into Mauthausen - and I was an enlisted man, correspondent - of all the sights and sounds that stunned me, the weakness of the brave men and women who survived was the most memorable and I wrote that with thousands dead and hundreds alive, those in barracks, six high, four men in a bed, when we walked through, they shouted in various languages: "Viva Americanski!" And then to my great embarrassment, they applauded, but their hands were so emaciated, so much without flesh, that it sounded to me, and I wrote, that it was like seals clapping. Murrow, whom I never knew at that time, although we later became fast friends and partners, described the same event, hundreds of miles away, almost to the minute, as the prisoners were so weak that it sounded like emaciated babies clapping .

You are familiar with the sound: "This is Edward R. Murrow, this is London." That battle is over. Ed is gone, but he lives and I think he might introduce this by saying: "This is Buchenwald, April 11th, 1945." Please listen even if it's hard.

..."with me on Thursday. It will not be pleasant listening. If you're at lunch, or if you have no appetite to hear what Germans have done, now is a good time to switch off the radio for I propose to tell you about Buchenwald. It is on a small hill about four miles outside Weimar and it was one of the largest concentration camps in Germany and it was built to last. As we approached it we saw about a hundred men in civilian clothes with rifles, but dancing in open order across the fields. There were a few shots. We stopped to enquire. We were told that some of the prisoners had a couple of SS men cornered in

there. We drove on, reached the main gate. The prisoners crowded up behind the wire. We entered. And now let me tell this in the first person for I was the least important person there as you shall hear. There surged around me an evil smelling of horrors. Men and boys reached out to touch me. They were in rags and the remnants of uniforms. Death had already marked many of them, but they were smiling with their eyes. I looked out over that mass of men to the green fields beyond where well-fed Germans were plowing. A German, Fritz Gersheimer, came up and said: "May I show you around the camp? I've been here ten years." An Englishman stood to attention saying: "May I introduce myself? Delighted to see you. And can you tell me when some of our blokes will be along?" I told him: "Soon," and asked to see one of the barracks. It happened to be occupied by Czechoslovakians. When I entered men crowded around, tried to lift me to their shoulders. They were too weak. Many of them could not get out of bed. I was told that this building had once stabled eighty horses. There were twelve hundred men in it, five to a bunk. The stink was beyond all description. When I reached the center of the barracks a man came up and said: "You remember me. I'm Pieter Zinko, one-time mayor of Prague." I remembered him, but did not recognize him. He asked about Benish and Jan Mastericht .

I asked how many men had died in that building during the last month. They called the doctor. We inspected his records. There were only names in a little black book, nothing more. Nothing about where, what they had done or hoped. Behind the names of those who had died there was a cross. I counted them. They totaled two hundred and forty-two. Two hundred and forty-two out of twelve hundred in one month. As I walked down to the end of the barracks there was applause from the men too weak to get out of bed. It sounded like the hand-clapping of babies - they were so weak. The doctor's name was Paul Heller. He had been there since '38.

As we walked out into the courtyard a man fell dead. Two others - they must have been over sixty - were crawling towards the latrine. I saw it, but will not describe it. In another part of the camp they showed me the children, hundreds of them. Some were only six. One rolled up his sleeve, showed me his number. It was tattooed on his arm - B6030 it was. The others showed me

their numbers. They will carry them till they die. An elderly man standing beside me said: "The children - enemies of the state." I could see their ribs through their thin shirts. The old man said: "I am Professor Charles Richa of the Sorbonne." The children clung to my hands and stared. We crossed to the courtyard. Men kept coming up to speak to me and to touch me. Professors from Poland, doctors from Vienna, men from all Europe. Men from the countries that made America.

We went to the hospital - it was full. The doctor told me that two hundred had died the day before. I asked the cause of death. He shrugged and said: "Tuberculosis, starvation, fatigue, and there are many who have no desire to live. It is very difficult." Dr. Heller pulled back the blankets from a man's feet to show me how swollen they were. The man was dead. Most of the patients could not move. As we left the hospital I drew out a leather billfold hoping that I had some money which would help those who lived to get home. Professor Richa from the Sorbonne said: "I should be careful of my wallet if I were you. You know, there are criminals in this camp, too." A small man tottered up saying: "May I feel the leather please? You see, I used to make good things of leather in Vienna." Another man said: “My name is Walter Reuder. For many years I lived in Joliette. Came back to Germany for a visit and Hitler grabbed me”. I asked to see the kitchen. It was clean. The German in charge had been a Communist, had been at Buchenwald for nine years. Had a picture of his daughter in Hamburg, hadn't seen her for almost twelve years, and if I got to Hamburg would I look her up. He showed me the daily ration: one piece of brown bread about as thick as your thumb. On top of it a piece of margarine as big as three sticks of chewing gum. That, and a little stew was what they received every twenty-four hours. He had a chart on the wall, very complicated it was. There were little red tabs scattered through it. He said that was to indicate each ten men who died. He had to account for the rations and he added: “We're very efficient here”.

We went again into the courtyard and as we walked, we talked. The two doctors, the Frenchman and the Czech, agreed that about six thousand had died during March. Kirshenheimer, the German, added that back in the winter of '39 when the Poles began to arrive without winter clothing, they died at the

rate of approximately nine hundred a day. Five different men asserted that Buchenwald was the best concentration camp in Germany. They had had some experience of the others .

Dr. Heller, the Czech, asked if I would care to see the crematorium. He said it wouldn't be very interesting because the Germans had run out of coal some days ago and had taken to dumping the bodies into a great hole nearby.

Professor Richa said perhaps I would care to see the small courtyard. I said yes. He turned and told the children to stay behind. As we walked across the square I noticed that the professor had a hole in his left shoe and a toe sticking out of the right one. He followed my eyes and said: "I regret that I am so little presentable, but what can one do?" At that point another Frenchman came up to announce that three of his fellow countrymen outside had killed three SS men and taken one prisoner.

We proceeded to the small courtyard. The wall was about eight feet high. It adjoined what had been a stable or garage. We entered. It was floored with concrete. There were two rows of bodies stacked up like cordwood. They were thin and very white. Some of the bodies were terribly bruised though there seemed to be little flesh to bruise. Some had been shot through the head, but they bled but little. All except two were naked. I tried to count them as best I could and arrived at the conclusion that all that was mortal of more than five hundred men and boys lay there in two neat piles. There was a German trailer, which must have contained another fifty, but it wasn't possible to count them. The clothing was piled in a heap against the wall. It appeared that most of the men and boys had died of starvation. They had not been executed, but the manner of death seemed unimportant. Murder had been done at Buchenwald. G-d alone knows how many men and boys have died there during the last twelve years. Thursday I was told that there were more than twenty thousand in the camp. There had been as many as sixty thousand. Where are they now?

As I left that camp, a Frenchman who used to work for Havas in Paris came up to me and said: "You will write something about this perhaps?" And he added: "To write about this you must have been here at least two years and after that you don't want to write anymore ".

I pray you to believe what I have said about Buchenwald. I have reported what I saw and heard, but only part of it. For most of it I have no words. Dead men are plentiful in war, but the living dead, more than twenty thousand of them in one camp, and the country round about was pleasing to the eye. And the Germans were well fed and well dressed. American trucks were rolling towards the rear filled with prisoners. Soon they would be eating American rations, as much for a meal as the men at Buchenwald received in four days. If I have offended you by this rather mild account of Buchenwald I am not in the least sorry.

I was there on Thursday and many men in many tongues blessed the name of Roosevelt. For long years his name had meant the full measure of their hope. These men who had kept close company with death for many years did not know that Mr. Roosevelt would within hours join their comrades who had laid their lives on the scales of freedom. Back in '41 Mr. Churchill said to me, with tears in his eyes: "One day the world and history will recognize and acknowledge what it owes to your president." I saw and heard the first installment of that at Buchenwald on Thursday. It came from men from all over Europe. Their faces, with more flesh on them, might have been found anywhere at home. To them the name Roosevelt was a symbol, the code word for a lot of guys named Joe who were somewhere out in the blue with the armor heading east. At Buchenwald they spoke of the president just before he died. If there be a better epitaph, history does not record it.

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