

Richard Dimpleby Describes Belsen

British troops liberated the Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp on 15th April 1945. Reporter Richard Dimpleby accompanied them, and his reaction on seeing the horror of the camp was recorded for radio.

“I have just returned from the Belsen Concentration Camp, where for two hours I drove slowly about the place in a jeep with the chief doctor of second army. I had waited a day before going to the camp so that I could be absolutely sure of the facts now available. I find it hard to describe adequately the horrible things that I have seen and heard, but here, unadorned are the facts. There are 40,000 men, women and children in the camp: German and half a dozen other nationalities, thousands of them Jews. Of this total of 40,000 - 4,250 are acutely ill or dying of virulent disease. Typhus, typhoid, diphtheria, dysentery, pneumonia and child-birth fever are rife. 25,600, three quarters of them women, are either ill from lack of food, or are actually dying of starvation. In the last few months alone, 30,000 prisoners have been killed off or allowed to die. Those are the simple, horrible facts of Belsen. But horrible as they are they can convey little or nothing in themselves. I wish with all my heart that everyone fighting in this war and above all those whose duty it is to direct the war from Britain and America could have come with me through the barbed wire fence that leads to the inner compound of the camp.

Outside, it had been the lucky prisoners, the men and women who had only just arrived at Belsen before we captured it. But beyond the barrier was a whirling cloud of dust, the dust of thousands of slowly moving people laden in itself with the deadly typhus germ, and with the dust, was a smell, sickly and thick, the smell of death and decay, of corruption and filth. I passed through the barrier and found myself in the world of a nightmare. Dead bodies, some of them in decay, lay strewn about the road and on the rutted tracks. On each side of the road were brown, wooden huts. There were faces at the windows, the bony, emaciated faces of starving women, too weak to come outside. Propping themselves against the glass to see the daylight before they died. And they were dying every hour and every minute. I saw a man, wandering dazedly along the road, stagger and fall, someone else looked down at him, took him by the heels and dragged him to the side of the road to join the other bodies lying unburied there. No one else took the slightest notice; they didn't even trouble to turn their heads. Behind the huts, two youths and two girls who'd found a morsel of food were sitting together on the grass in picnic fashion, sharing it. They were not six feet from a pile of decomposing bodies. Inside the huts it was even worse. I've seen many terrible sights

in the last five years, but nothing, nothing approaching the dreadful interior of this hut at Belsen. The dead and the dying lay close together. I picked my way over corpse after corpse in the gloom until I heard one voice that rose above the gentle undulating moaning. I found a girl; she was a living skeleton, impossible to gauge her age, for she had practically no hair left on her head and her face was only a yellow parchment sheet with two holes in it for eyes. She was stretching out her stick of an arm and gasping something. It was "*English, English, medicine, medicine*". And she was trying to cry, but had not enough strength. And beyond her, down the passage and in the hut, there were the convulsive movements of dying people, too weak to raise themselves from the floor. They were crawling with lice and smeared with filth. They'd had no food for days, for the Germans sent it down into the camp on block and only those strong enough to come out of the huts could get it. The rest of them lay there in the shadows, growing weaker and weaker. There was no one to take the bodies away when they died and I had to look hard to see who was alive and who was dead. It was the same outside in the compounds and between the huts.

Men and women, lying about the ground and the rest of the procession of ghosts, wandering aimlessly about them. In the shade of some trees, lay a great collection of bodies. I walked round them, trying to count. There were perhaps 150 flung down on each other, all naked, all so thin, that their yellow skin glistened like stretched rubber on their bones. Some of the poor, starved creatures bodies were there looked so utterly unreal, and inhuman that I could have imagined that they had never lived at all. They were like polished skeletons: the skeletons that medical students like to play practical jokes with. At one end of the pile, a cluster of men and women were gathered round a fire. They were using rags and old shoes taken from the bodies to keep it alight and they were heating soup on it. And close by was the enclosure where 500 children between the ages of 5 and 12 had been kept, they were not so hungry as the rest, for the women had sacrificed themselves to keep them alive. Babies were born at Belsen, some of them shrunken, wizened little things that could not live because their mothers could not feed them. One woman distraught to the point of madness, flung herself at a British soldier who was on guard at them camp, on the night that it was reached by the 11th armoured division. She begged him to give her some milk for the tiny baby she held in her arms. She laid the mite on the ground, threw herself at the sentry's feet and kissed his boots. And when in his distress, he asked her to get up, she put the baby in his arms and ran off, crying that she would find milk for it because there was no milk in her breast. And when the soldier opened the bundle of rags to look at the child, he found it had been dead for days.

I have never seen British soldiers so moved to cold fury as the men who opened the Belsen camp this week and those of the police and the RAMC who are now on duty there, trying to save the prisoners who are not too far gone in starvation. The SS guards, who shot several of the prisoners after we'd arrived in the camp when they

thought no one was looking, are now gathering up all the bodies, and carting them away for burial. German prisoners are being sent up for the same sort of work. Cramer, the SS major who was commandant of the camp and who had been second in command of one of the mass murder camps in Poland, lies today in a British prison-cage. As we went deeper into the camp and further from the main gate, we saw more and more of the horrors of the place. And I realised that what is so ghastly, is not so much the individual acts of barbarism that take place in SS camps, but the gradual breakdown of civilisation that happens when human beings are herded like animals behind barbed wire. Here in Belsen, we were seeing people, many of them lawyers and doctors and chemists, musicians, authors; who'd long since ceased to care about the conventions and the customs of normal life. There had been no privacy there of any kind. Women stood naked at the side of the track, washing in cup fulls of water, taken from British army water trucks, others squatted, while they searched themselves for lice, and examined each others' hair. Sufferers from dysentery leaned against the huts, straining helplessly, and all around and about them was this awful, drifting tide of exhausted people, neither caring nor waiting, just a few held out their withered hands to us as we passed by, and blessed the doctor whom they knew had become camp commander in the place of the brutal Cramer.

We were on our way down to the crematorium, where the Germans had burned alive thousands of men and women in a single fire. The furnace was in a hut about the size of a single garage, and the hut was surrounded by a small stockade. A little Pole, whose prison number was tattooed on the inside of his forearm, as it was on all the others, told me how they burned the people. They brought them into the stockade, walked them in, and then an SS guard hit them on the back of the neck, with a club and stunned them. And then, they were fed straight into the fire, three at a time, two men, one woman. The opening was not big enough for three men, and that I verified by measuring it. They burned 10,000 people in this fire, in the reprisal for the murder of two SS guards. And back in the hut by the main gate of the camp, I questioned the sergeant who'd been in charge of one of the SS squads. He was a fair haired, gangling creature with tiny, crooked ears rather like girdles and big hands. His SS uniform was undone and dirty. He was writing out his confession, while a young North Country Anti – Tank gunner of the 11th armoured division kept watch on him with a tommy gun that never moved. I asked him how many people he had killed. He looked vacant for a moment, and then he replied, *“Oh I don't remember”*.

I have set down these facts at length, because in common with all of us who have been to the camp, I feel that you should be told, without reserve, exactly what has been happening here. Every fact I've so far given you has been verified. But there is one, more awful than all the others that I've kept to the end. Far away in a corner of Belsen camp, there is a pit, the size of a tennis court. It's fifteen feet deep, and at one end it's piled to the very top with naked bodies, that have been tumbled in, one on top of the

other. Like this, must have been the plague pits in England, 300 hundred years ago, only nowadays we can help by digging them quicker with bulldozers, and already there's a bulldozer working in Belsen. Our army doctors examining some of these bodies, found in their sides, a long slit, apparently made by someone with surgical knowledge. They made enquiries. And they established beyond doubt, that in the frenzy of their starvation, some of the people of Belsen had taken the wasted bodies of their fellow prisoners, and had removed from them, the only remaining flesh. The liver and the kidneys, to eat. May I add to this story only the assurance that everything that an army can do to save these men and women and children, is being done. And that those officers and men who've seen these things, have gone back to the second army, moved to an anger such as I have never seen in them before."

You can listen to the full report on the BBC archive website:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/holocaust/5115.shtml?all=1&id=5115>