

## THE WAY OF THE CROSS I DAILY ROUTINE IN THE CAMP – A VIA CRUCIS

### **First Station: Roll call area**

Even here in the concentration camp people dreamt at night. Perhaps there were even some pleasant dreams. Perhaps one or the other prisoner felt free, safe, loved in his dreams. About where we are standing now is where the loudspeaker mast stood 65 years ago. Every morning at four o'clock the siren would sound from here. And the friendlier the dream was, the worse the awakening. Every morning, one is shoved back into misfortune. 17 hours are in store, 17 hours of drudgery, cold, heat, fear, deadly peril, beatings, humiliation, thirst, hunger, being at the mercy of others, fatigue. After the morning wash, first the room has to be fastidiously cleaned and the bed meticulously "rebuilt". Any minute negligence can lead to punishment. First questions arise: Is that fellow there a snitch, a traitor? Will I get slightly more bearable work today? Where can I get hold of some extra food today? Using dry leaves and acorns, "ersatz coffee" is brewed for breakfast. Those who still have bread may now eat it, on good days there is even some margarine or jam. Afterwards all stand to attention here at the parade ground for roll call. Sometimes the dead of the night lie on the ground to be added to the sum. Some work groups are now reclassified. Then comes the march through the gate to work.



From the Gospel according to Saint Mark.

They came to a small estate called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Stay here while I pray'. Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and keep awake.' And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed. He came back and found them sleeping. He said to them, 'You can sleep on now and take your rest. It is all over. The hour has come. Now the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up! Let us go! My betrayer is close at hand already.'

(Mk 14/32-35a,37a,41-42)

As night falls, the Way of the Cross begins for Jesus. He has committed no crime, but He has become bothersome to some of those in power. His freedom is taken away, He is humiliated, He is killed. And yet it is because of *Him*, the prisoner, the humiliated, the murdered, that this story is retold even after millennia.

As day breaks, the Way of the Cross begins for the Concentration Camp prisoners. They have committed no crime, but they have become bothersome to some of those in power. Their freedom is taken away, they are humiliated, many of them die. And yet it is because of *them*, the prisoners, the humiliated, the murdered, that this story will be remembered here for a long time.

Jesus' Way of the Cross was unique, because Jesus was unique. But the brutality he was subjected to was unfortunately not unique. To this day

people have to travel the Way to the Cross. And the responsible baseness—  
lurks latently to a smaller or larger degree even in our own hearts.

Kyrie eleison...

## **Second Station: Messerschmitt Barrack**

As of 1943, prisoners had to work in this barrack for Messerschmitt, an aircraft manufacturer. This “Messerschmidt-Commando” was one of the few production sites on the premises of today’s memorial site; most other prisoner work groups or “commandos” were in the vicinity of this rectangle, beyond the seven watchtowers. Daily routine in a concentration camp means work, and manpower is to be used



as effectively as possible. Laziness, sabotage, refusal to work are therefore the ultimate crimes. The prisoner has to grasp this immediately: I am now an object of utility and have to be useful, otherwise I have no chance of survival. Even though I am a lawyer, I will say that I am excellent at carpentry, or masonry. I will learn it then anyhow. If I cannot work anymore, I will be a “useless eater” and will be in danger of being discarded like a broken tool. I have to try to become friends with the fellows from the work assignment commando, perhaps then they can assign me to some sort of work where I can have a roof over my head, where the “Capo” or foreman doesn’t beat me and where I can at times hide and have a little rest. But if I end up in the punishment company I am as good as finished.

From the Gospel according to Saint John.

Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. They then took charge of Jesus, and carrying his own cross he went out of the city to the place of the skull or, as it was called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified him with two others, one on either side with Jesus in the middle.

(Jn 19/16-18)

The bible relates few details of Jesus’ actual “way of the cross”. “Carrying his own cross” – only these 4 words, but they say enough. With the last ounce of energy from his already forfeited life, the condemned has to carry the instrument of his own demise to the site of his death by himself. Jesus’ last “labour” originates from pure cruelty.

The work of the Concentration Camp prisoners was, at least usually, supposed to have a purpose. Actually, of course it is good if work has a proper purpose. Also and especially, if my work is hard and difficult – if I can see the benefit, I have a good feeling about it in the end. But the prerequisite is that one does not *exclusively* see my usefulness. That I am not reduced to only my usefulness. That one doesn’t misuse me. That one doesn’t abuse me. For I am a human being. I am more than just my usefulness. I have a right to do things that are only useful to myself. I have a right to do useless things. And once in a while, to do nothing at all.

I know all of these things. Even so, it does happen that I judge people only according to their usefulness. As it was in the Concentration Camp.

Kyrie eleison...

### Third Station: Jourhaus

Daily routine in the camp was ruled by the SS, whose service building we are now standing in front of. The left room over the gate was particularly feared, because this is where interrogations took place, and the methods used for “interrogation” were obviously not very pleasant. Yet one must not imagine the SS as a horde of rowdies and sadists. These existed, but they didn’t enjoy special prestige with their colleagues. Rather, an SS-man was supposed to display attributes which can be honourable even in our eyes: discipline, fulfilment of one’s duty, incorruptibility, camaraderie, selfless dedication to the cause. Again and again, former SS-members have proudly referred to these virtues, and one probably cannot completely contradict them. The SS really only made *one* mistake: It dared to divide humanity into two groups. Group one was on the side of the Fuehrer, was useful for Germany and “racially of high quality”. Group two was against the Fuehrer, was damaging to Germany and “racially inferior”. Group two had no rights, least of all a right to life; it was subject to the power of the SS, to be used and used up for the benefit of group one. This one mistake, this differentiation between “master race” and “subhuman beings” made the “elite troop SS” an abject and dangerous band of criminals.



From the Gospel according to Saint Mark.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus on which they might pass the death-sentence. But they could not find any. Several, indeed, brought false evidence against him, but their evidence was conflicting. The high priest then stood up before the whole assembly and put this question to Jesus, 'Are you the Christ,' he said 'the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus 'and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.' The high priest tore his robes, 'What need of witnesses have we now?' he said. 'You heard the blasphemy. What is your finding?' And they all gave their verdict: he deserved to die.

(Mk 14/55-56,60a,61b-64)

There are differences between different people. Many, many differences. Thank God for these differences. And it can also happen that the behaviour of one human being deviates so much from that of others in such an unbearable way that one has, by way of exception, to undertake something about such a person. Please note, by way of an exception, and woe if one errs in such a matter. The high priest considered Jesus to be exactly such an unbearable person – and he made a terrible mistake. As a rule, a human being may not be subjugated by another, least of all because he is different. The hubris of power can even begin, if I think I can judge someone, if I submit someone to my prejudice, if I judge someone according to my own standards.

Kyrie eleison...

## Fourth Station: Bunker

How does one get someone to do something he does not want to do – for instance make him obey without contradiction or make him work till he drops? Answer: instill fear. The daily routine in the camp is therefore riddled with fear. As bad as the situation is for the individual prisoner, it can always worsen, especially if one is subjected to “punishment”. The different forms of punishment in the camp are assigned according to a detailed system, so that the SS can consider all punishment to be “orderly”. The terror is supposed to be exercised not arbitrarily, but rather in a disciplined fashion, and “discipline” is a good thing – not so? The range of possible punishment extends from the loss of privileges to all variants of torment and even the loss of life. The building in front of us, the so called Bunker, or Camp Prison, also played an important role in the punishment system. Confinement in the Bunker can vary. The duration ranges from a few days to a number of weeks; there are “hard beds”, denial of meals, dark cells, standing cells. The Bunker courtyard was also a site of dreadful torture during some periods: Here, one was hung up on a pole by the hands from behind or beaten on a whipping trestle.



From the Gospel according to Saint Luke.

Pilate then summoned the chief priests and the leading men and the people. ‘You brought this man before me’ he said ‘as a political agitator. Now I have gone into the matter myself in your presence and found no case against the man in respect of all the charges you bring against him. Nor has Herod either, since he has sent him back to us. As you can see, the man has done nothing that deserves death, so I shall have him flogged and then let him go.’ But they kept on shouting at the top of their voices, demanding that he should be crucified.

(Lk 23/13-16, 23a)

All repressive systems rule through the fear of punishment. But even our free, liberal world can obviously not do without forms of punishment – “commensurate” forms of punishment, of course. Punishment exists in education, in schools, in the penal code, and additionally, one can be punished with contempt, with scorn, with withdrawal of love, with loss of face. Punishment is a strange thing: one inflicts something evil on a person, to prevent this person from doing an evil deed. The person is supposed to improve him- or herself out of fear. I ask myself: Have I ever left an evil deed undone out of fear of punishment? Are there cases, in which I do the right thing solely to avoid being punished? If so, that proves an old axiom: punishment is necessary. Unfortunately. And punishment is always dangerous. It can be abused at any time, as an outlet for hate, anger, revenge, as a demonstration of power.

Kyrie eleison...

## **Fifth Station: Prisoner hospital**

The two numberless barracks here were designated as the prisoner hospital from the beginning. Prisoners worked here as nurses under the supervision of SS-doctors; as of 1942, medical doctors among the prisoners were also deployed here. If the manpower of a prisoner was still needed, this is where it was restored, providing this did not need too much effort. A prisoner



who overstayed his welcome in the hospital was in danger of being murdered on site with a poisonous injection or by transferral to the invalid block and subsequent transportation to the gas chamber.

Looking at the daily routine in the camp, one wonders how one can survive such a life without being permanently sick. The cold, the heat, thirst, hunger, lack of vitamins, exhaustion, injuries, never ending stress – many men survive that. But not all of them. Diarrhoea and pneumonia are particularly prevalent. The daily orderliness and cleanliness terror is also supposed to lower the risk of epidemics, but even so, abdominal typhus breaks out at the beginning of 1943. And as of autumn 1944, the catastrophic typhus epidemic becomes unstoppable. Already in 1940, the hospital was extended from two to four blocks; at liberation, it consisted of 13 blocks. Most of the 31951 registered dead of the Dachau camp probably ultimately died of a disease, after the daily “way of the cross” destroyed their resistance.

From the Gospel according to Saint John.

After this, Jesus knew that everything had now been completed, and to fulfil the scripture perfectly he said: ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar full of vinegar stood there, so putting a sponge soaked in the vinegar on a hyssop stick they held it up to his mouth. (Jn 19/28-29)

Wherever Jesus goes, the mute speak, the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, and the lepers become clean. Jesus, the salvation of the world. He himself is never sick. Only just before the end, immediately before His death, does Jesus speak for the one and only time about his own physical pain: I am thirsty. Here, the salvation of the world is vanquished.

A concentration camp is a calamity. It produces disease, it saps the health of the sick, it pushes the sick to their ultimate demise.

Christians stand on the side of salvation. They try to heal wherever and as best as they can. One should be cautious when saying: a disease is “the will of God”. A disease may often be inevitable, but first and foremost, it is God’s will that the sick receive help. He who helps a sick person is closer then, than at any other time to the kingdom of God. Tears are dried, and death overcome, *that* is will of God.

Kyrie eleison...

## Sixth Station: In the middle of the camp

The SS knew how to use not only the strength but also the weaknesses of the prisoners to undermine their solidarity. Every human being has weaknesses, and the harder the struggle for survival becomes, the more prominent they can become. Saving one's *own* skin has top priority. The SS provides privileges and advantages to certain prisoners, more security, even a "position of influence", and in return demands reliable cooperation. In so doing, a large



segment of the day to day surveillance duties are assigned to so-called "prisoner foremen", named "room eldest", "block eldest", "Capos" etc.; additionally, the SS infiltrate the camp with a network of informers. Some "Capos" use their position clandestinely to the benefit of their comrades, but others just try unscrupulously to prove themselves to be up to the job by shouting, insulting, by beating, by denouncing. When, however, a Capo like this loses his position he is paid back in kind.

The daily struggle for survival dulls sympathy for others. Wherever suffering is omnipresent, one cannot afford sympathy. Wherever death is all around, one cannot linger to mourn. Day and night one is surrounded by other people, without any sense of privacy; often getting horrendously on one another's nerves and making each other's life even more difficult than it already is. The different prisoner groups distrust each other. The language is often harsh, cynical, aggressive. Those caught as bread thieves can expect to be beaten up by their fellow comrades. Even on the day of liberation, there were acts of revenge of prisoners against prisoners.

This atmosphere of harshness and lack of sympathy shaped the daily routine, it was omnipresent. This is why we are not standing in front of a specific building now, but simply in the middle of the camp. In the middle of an in-humane site, where it was not easy to remain humane.

From the Gospel according to Saint Matthew.

The governor's soldiers took Jesus with them into the Praetorium and collected the whole cohort round him. Then they stripped him and made him wear a scarlet cloak, and having twisted some thorns into a crown they put this on his head and placed a reed in his right hand. To make fun of him they knelt to him saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' And they spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head with it.

(Mt 27/27-30)

Much has been said against compassion. It supposedly abases the receiver, it supposedly only hinders practical help, it is supposedly arrogant to want to share the feelings of another person, and compassion is most often feigned and false anyway. Jesus saw things differently: He tells the story of the travelling Samaritan, who sees an injured person and *feels compassion*. For Jesus, compassion is the key to charity. Perhaps the SS knew that as well. Perhaps the bullying Capos did so too. Perhaps the Roman soldiers did also. Just don't let compassion well up! Once compassion has surfaced, one cannot carry out one's brutal job properly anymore. And how does one suppress compassion? By striking even harder than before. By – on top of it

– laughing at the condemned and by making fun of him with a crown of thorns. This is how one trains oneself to be a hard man. Compassion alone is insufficient, but it is a beginning. We must never become indifferent. It is like shared joy and any other shared emotion, an indispensable part of our humanity.

Kyrie eleison...

### **Seventh Station: Karmel**

The people in the camp were imprisoned, but still free enough to make a decision for themselves each day: Do I want to improve my chances of survival *at the expense* of my comrades or will I improve them *together with* my comrades? Do I practice treachery or solidarity? Many choose the second option. They do not merely wish to save their skin, but also their humanity, their “soul”. This



becomes apparent via seemingly trivial examples : A Capo, who has already lifted his fist, does *not* strike. The theft of a foul potato is *not* reported. A dry piece of bread is shared. The work of an exhausted prisoner is tacitly completed by another. It is important that the soul remains alive.

Particularly in the priest’s barracks, there are lectures, language courses, discussions and even a choir during spare time. Non-German priests, forbidden to use the chapel, risk holding collective prayer. For riskier activities one must be clever and resourceful. An example: A prisoner working on the gravel pit commando is going to the dogs. Then, under a believable pretext, he is reassigned to an easier work group and is able to recover. Or: A man is about to be redeployed – deadly peril! One knows someone who in turn knows someone else, who is close to someone working in the prisoner registration office. The number of the endangered prisoner is swapped with that of one of the dead. Someone who is pronounced dead by the registration office is not sent on the transport. Or: A priest is critically ill in the hospital. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, he receives an injection. He recovers. Who gave the injection? He never finds out. It is important to belong to a group. Poles help Poles, communists help communists. Those who are alone and don’t know anyone are in dire straits. Even so, there are friendships across national and ideological borders. In the hospital, one often helps without regard to the identity of the prisoner, sometimes even without regard for one’s own safety: Many priests are infected with typhus during nursing and die, shortly after liberation.

(Please read the stanzas alternately with short breathing spaces)

From the Passion:

The others seized him and took him in charge. Then one of the bystanders drew his sword and struck out at the high priest’s servant, and cut off his ear. (Mk 14/46-47)

And they all deserted him and ran away. A young man who followed him had nothing on but a linen cloth. (Mk 14/50-51)

Now as he was seated in the chair of judgement, his wife sent him a message, 'Have nothing to do with that man; I have been upset all day by a dream I had about him'. (Mt 27/19)

As they were leading him away they seized on a man, Simon from Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and made him shoulder the cross and carry it behind Jesus. (Lk 23/26)

Large numbers of people followed him, and of women too, who mourned and lamented for him. (Lk 23/27)

One of the criminals hanging there said: 'You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus,' he said 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.' (Lk 23/40-42)

When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said, 'This was a great and good man'. (Lk 23/47)

All his friends stood at a distance; so also did the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, and they saw all this happen. (Lk 23/49)

And when all the people who had gathered for the spectacle saw what had happened, they went home beating their breasts. (Lk 23/48)

So Jesus is not quite alone on his last journey. An impulsive defender, a lightly clothed sympathiser, a secret advocate, an unwilling helper, sympathetic onlookers, an understanding fellow sufferer, a reflective officer, appalled relatives, a number of affected persons – people on the margins, events on the margins, they don't change anything, they don't move anything, they cannot avert fate. Really? Sometimes I think – even though it is of course theologically completely incorrect – that God finally decided to give humanity a new chance on the Morning of Easter only when he saw the few compassionate people on the fringes of the Way to the Cross.

The clandestine actions of solidarity in the Dachau Concentration Camp did not seriously upset the Concentration Camp system and certainly did not cause its collapse. But they are still a consolation for all later times that even such an intricate machinery of terror could not transform people to numbers. Many kept their heads, did not allow themselves to be broken, had humane feelings and acted according to their conscience.

If I should ever have the chance to change something and free someone or a number of people from the burden of a cross, I will hopefully use the opportunity joyfully. But even if I cannot really change anything, even if I myself am carrying a cross, every day offers chances to do good. This was the case in the Concentration Camp, and it is especially the case now in this wonderful freedom we enjoy.

Hymn

Prayers:

Merciful God,

Even today, almost 2000 years after Golgotha, 60 years after the downfall of the Nazi dictatorship, people are placing crosses on the shoulders of others, people must suffer due to other people.

We pray to you:

For all those who live under tyranny. Give them courage to resist when it is necessary.

For all those who were subjected to torture. heal their bodily and spiritual wounds.

For all those who have been robbed of their freedom just because they have become bothersome to someone in power. Give them the strength they need not to be broken.

For all the relatives of people who have vanished during periods of tyranny. Help them to bring those responsible to justice.

For all those whose labour has been mercilessly abused. Help them to be recognised as human beings and let them receive just compensation.

For all those who have been turned into a commodity by modern slave traders, have been sold, enslaved, debased or tormented. Help them to escape their exigency.

For all those who have become victims of so-called “normal everyday violence”, those humiliated by their fellow pupils, harassed by their neighbours, mobbed by their colleagues. Do not leave them alone with their problems.

For all families where there is violence. Let them rediscover their original affection.

For us all, we ask you with the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: Our Father who art in heaven...

Blessing

Text Michael Buchmann, Seelsorger in der KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau  
Foto Klaus Schultz, Evangelische Versöhnungskirche

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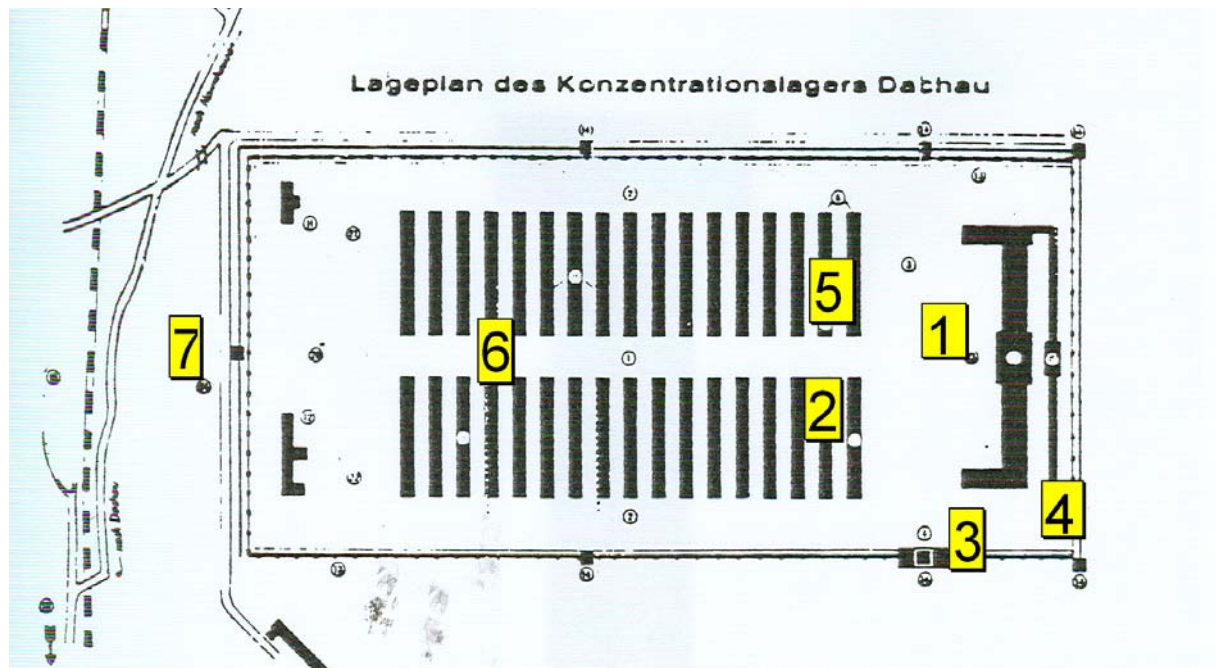
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### Stationen für den Kreuzweg

1. Station: Appellplatz
2. Station: Messerschmitt-Baracke
3. Station: Jourhaus
4. Station: Bunker
5. Station: Krankenrevier
6. Station: Mitten im Lager
7. Station: Karmel