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Infections, resistance and escaping

IN BYGONE DAYS

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In the final years of World War II, around 650 Norwegian students were held in prisoner-of-war camps and the Buchenwald concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Seventeen of them lost their lives.

SS training camp St Andreas in Sennheim (Cernay), France. Date unknown. Photo: Hans Trygve Tveten (1918–99)/ARKIVET Peace and Human Rights Center/CC-BY-SA

In the autumn of 1943, around 650 male students at the University of Oslo were arrested by the occupying authorities and sent to prisoner-of-war (POW) camps in Nazi Germany after the Germans closed the university (1–3). The

deportation was a result of an escalating conflict between the university and the occupying German forces, and virtually all male students who were not Nazi sympathisers were arrested (4). My father, Oddvar Berild (1918–94), was a medical student and one of the so-called *tysklandsstudenter* (Germany students) (5). He shared an apartment with two friends, all three of whom had been betrayed a month earlier. His friends managed to hide under their beds and later flee to Sweden, but my father was arrested.

SS camp Sennheim

Oddvar did not have any physical injuries from his imprisonment, but he often seemed restless to me, and towards the end of his life he suffered nightmares and called out in German in his asleep. He rarely spoke about his captivity, but we knew that he had kept a diary during his time in the camp. None of us children had read it. However, as the end of his life approached, he brought out two diaries handwritten in notebook format, totalling 160 pages, to ensure that we would read them (6).

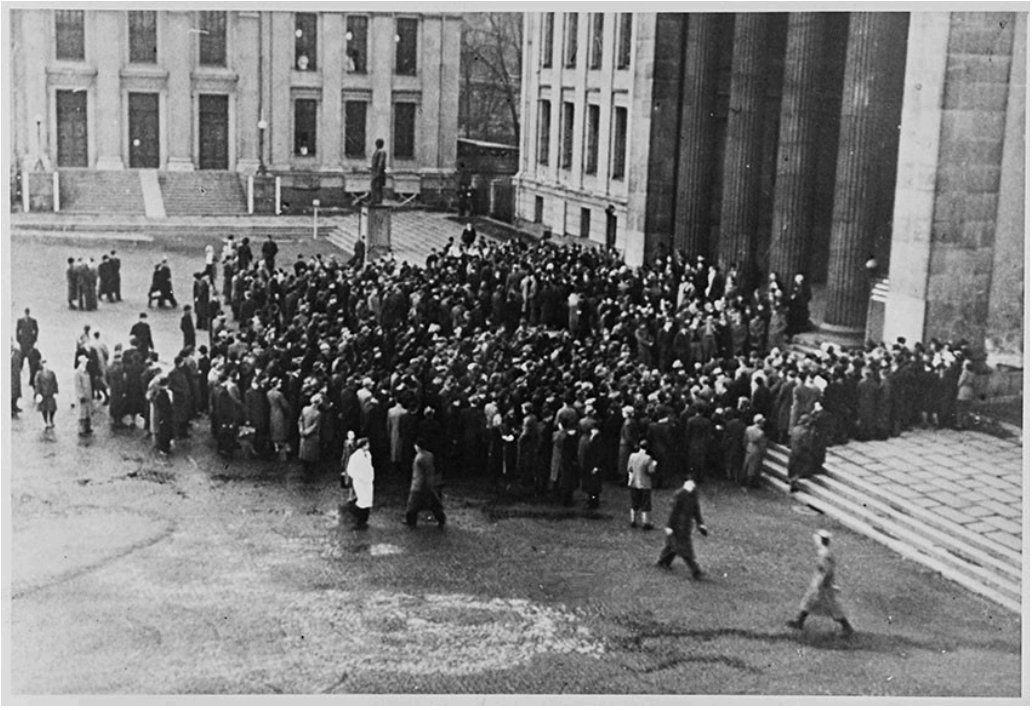
In October 1943, my father was due to begin clinical training in what was then called the 3rd Department of Medicine when he and several colleagues were reported and arrested by the Germans. Together with 39 other students, he was held at Bredtveit Prison in Groruddalen before being transferred to Stavern. He was then sent on the prisoner ship Donau to Stettin in Poland, along with the other students who had been arrested. From there, around half of them were sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, while most of the others were sent to an SS camp in Sennheim in Alsace, in what is now France (1).

> ***«The camp administration attempted to convert them to the Nazi racial ideology, but did not succeed. The students refused to wear Nazi symbols on their jackets, belts and caps, and ultimately prevailed in this regard»***

My father was first sent to Sennheim. For the SS, it was paradoxical that young Norwegian academics, whom they regarded as the elite of the Aryan, Germanic race, could show resistance to the National Socialism ideology. The camp administration attempted to convert them to the Nazi racial ideology, but did not succeed (7). The students refused to wear Nazi symbols on their jackets, belts and caps, and ultimately prevailed in this regard.

During their stay in Sennheim, two of the students contracted meningococcal meningitis and died. My father wrote that many others had fever, headaches and signs of meningism. Around 170 men were housed in two rooms, and around 120 in three rooms. Per Oeding (1916–2003), who later became a professor of microbiology in Bergen, already had considerable experience in microbiology as a student. He persuaded the camp administration to have all the Norwegian prisoners screened for meningococci. Of the approximately 250 who were screened, over 40 men

(15–20 %) were found to carry meningococci in their throats. These prisoners were isolated for 3–4 weeks, and no further cases of meningitis occurred. It is well documented that living at close quarters while being subjected to severe physical strain, as the students were, increases the risk of a meningococcal outbreak (8).



The students in Oslo were arrested on 30 November 1943. Photo: UiO/CC BY 2.0

Together with 35 other student prisoners, my father was sent twice to Freiburg to study. They were allowed to move around there as relatively free men. My father attended classes at the Women's Clinic in the city, but his last stay was short.

In his diary he wrote: 'From our last stay in Freiburg, the bombing on 27 November will remain etched in my memory forever. It was terrible but necessary to defeat those damned Germans' (6). Within 20 minutes, around 3000 bombs were dropped, killing approximately 2100 and injuring 6300 people. My father recounted that after the bombing, limbs and other body parts lay strewn around the area near the railway station. The Norwegian students worked tirelessly to rescue the wounded and recover the dead from the ruins. Those who were medical students were able to put their knowledge to good use. One of the students later died from injuries sustained in the bombing.

> ***«It was a dramatic journey. First they crossed the Rhine and then travelled on foot through the Black Forest, enduring terrifying confrontations with sadistic guards, cold weather, lack of food, hunger, blisters, sleep deprivation and existential fear»***

In late autumn 1944, as the Allied front line approached Sennheim, the students were to be transferred to Buchenwald. It was a dramatic journey. First, they crossed the Rhine and then travelled on foot through the Black Forest, enduring terrifying confrontations with sadistic guards, cold weather, lack of food, hunger, blisters, sleep deprivation and existential fear. In the

village of Burkheim, the students were ordered to dig trenches, but they all refused to comply, even when lined up in front of the town hall under threat of being shot (1).

For the last four days of the journey, they were locked in cattle wagons with almost no food or water, while being transported by rail to Buchenwald. By the time they arrived, many of the men were in a critical condition (1, 7).

KZ camp Buchenwald

In Buchenwald, the students were forced to work outdoors in the snow and cold. My father wrote in his diary: '1 January 1945. We're now getting 1/6 of a loaf of bread per day, and lunch only consists of thin soup. Yesterday I ate my last piece of bread at 1 pm and celebrated New Year's Eve on an empty stomach' (6).

Another diary entry describes how my father developed a purulent sinusitis, which he recovered from after a fellow student treated him with ephedrine. The prisoners slept head-to-toe, two to a bunk stacked three high. Up to 50 fleas could be found inside their sleeping bags in the morning (6). Flea bites often developed into erysipelas, and influenza into pneumonia. For some unknown reason, my father and his fellow medical students had a supply of 75 sulfa tablets, which proved useful in cases of pneumonia.

SS training camp St Andreas in Sennheim (Cernay), France. Date unknown. Photo: Hans Trygve Tveten (1918–99)/ARKIVET Peace and Human Rights Center/CC-BY-SA

Personal hygiene was poor. Days could pass before the men had a wash, and the water was often dirty. There was a high incidence of diarrhoea in the camp, as well as typhoid, paratyphoid and dysentery, my father wrote. The latrine

consisted of a pole smeared with human faeces. One of the students who contracted dysentery described witnessing a French fellow prisoner drown in the filth while he helplessly watched on (3).

> *«'I've seen things so inhumane that I will never forget them. They were walking, emaciated skeletons with wool blankets draped over their shoulders. Their eyes were sunken, their noses pointed and teeth rotten or missing. They had shaved heads and were filthy.'»*

Between 60,000 and 100,000 prisoners were living at the Buchenwald camp in the winter of 1945, and the camp hospital could only care for a fraction of those who needed help. There was also an *Experimentalbau*, where medical experiments were conducted on prisoners with yellow fever, smallpox, diphtheria, typhoid and paratyphoid. Blood from patients with epidemic typhus was injected intravenously, and 90 % of these prisoners suffered a painful death (1).

My father wrote in his diary: 'I've seen things so inhumane that I will never forget them. They were walking, emaciated skeletons with wool blankets draped over their shoulders. Their eyes were sunken, their noses pointed and teeth rotten or missing. They had shaved heads and were filthy. They rummage through our waste bins, licking every scrap of paper and empty can. We had to watch this misery. I notice that I've become numb over recent weeks. Nothing impresses me anymore like it did in the beginning.' (6).

On 27 January 1945, the students had their status upgraded because they were considered Germans. They were spared from the toil of forced labour and received SS rations. My father was assigned work in the camp hospital's pathology department. He wrote in his diary: 'In the courtyard outside the pathology building lay a huge pile of cachectic corpses, and down in the basement were several hundred more waiting to be cremated. A stack of frozen bodies about 10 metres long and two metres high lay along the outside wall.' (6).

My father wrote that almost all of the autopsied bodies had serous pericarditis, and many died of sepsis originating from sores. One day he performed an autopsy on a man who had died of gastroenteritis caused by circulatory failure and dehydration. Another day he found syphilis in a sore and noted that it must, of course, have been an SS man.

Fleeing from Heidelberg

Most of the students in Buchenwald were rescued by the White Buses in the spring of 1945 (1, 2). My father and eleven others were not among them. They had been sent to Heidelberg to study at the city's university.

SS training camp St Andreas in Sennheim (Cernay), France. Date unknown. Photo: Hans Trygve Tveten (1918–99)/ARKIVET Peace and Human Rights Center/CC-BY-SA

The train journey to Heidelberg was dramatic. My father wrote: 'As we boarded the train, the air raid siren sounded. We knew that most attacks by the Royal Air Force tended to occur at this time. We heard the faint rumble of distant planes. The train shuddered slightly, then stopped again. Seconds felt like hours, and the rumble grew louder. Finally, the train moved, and we had been travelling for no more than a minute when we saw flashes of light and heard explosions. We could see that both Weimar and Erfurt were being bombed.' (6). The next morning they were on their way to change trains in Meiningen, but suddenly had to disembark at the wrong station, Grimmenthal. Fifteen minutes later, Meiningen was attacked. 'Luck was on our side', he wrote (6). He continued: 'The next day in Osterburken we had a frightening experience. A couple of low-flying Jabos fired a salvo from their machine guns at us. We were in the fourth carriage and escaped unharmed, but the locomotive was completely destroyed.' (6). On 4 March, they arrived in Heidelberg and had an emotional reunion with eleven fellow students they had not seen since November.

As the Allies approached Heidelberg, the order was for the students to be deported to Berlin. This would likely have meant certain death. They faced the choice of either fleeing or killing the guard. According to my father's diary, one of the boys had hidden an axe in his mattress for this very purpose. There were heated discussions within the group because they knew that if even one person escaped, the rest would be executed. With the help of Professor Wichmann at the university, they managed to delay the departure to Berlin by two days as the Allies drew closer. A dramatic escape ensued (9). On 28 March, after intense deliberations, they slipped out in groups of two to four, with a head start of about 30 minutes before the guard would notice their absence.

«After six days, they dared to emerge and learned that the Americans had taken Heidelberg. My father described it as the greatest moment of his life»

My father and three friends lay under some spruce trees in the Neckar Valley until 3 April. It was cold and wet, and they had to take turns waking each other during the night to avoid freezing to death, he wrote. At the risk of being discovered, they had to sneak across a road at night to fetch water in a tin can. They also eased their thirst by licking drops of water from the spruce trees.

After six days, they dared to emerge and learned that the Americans had taken Heidelberg. My father described it as the greatest moment of his life. He and the other medical students joined the American Red Cross, which had a military secret called penicillin. They returned home to Norway in the late summer of 1945. There was a desperate shortage of doctors, so they had to complete three semesters of study in a single year.

Students returning home from captivity in Buchenwald, Oslo East Railway Station (Østbanestasjonen) 1945. Photo: Rigmor Dahl Delphin (1908–93)/Oslo Museum/in public ownership

Infections then and now

Seventeen of the 'Germany students' died during their imprisonment in Nazi Germany or shortly after their release (1). Two died of meningococcal meningitis, one of tuberculous meningitis and three of pulmonary tuberculosis. Two died of chronic nephritis, one of typhoid fever and one of scarlet fever and sepsis. One died from injuries sustained in the aforementioned bombing of the railway station, and one from a broken back. I have not found any information on the cause of death for the remaining five students.

Eighty years on, war has returned to Europe. Many of the infections afflicting the Ukrainian soldiers we are treating in Norway are almost untreatable due to antibiotic resistance. It feels like we have been blasted 80 years into the past – in more ways than one.

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