

April 24, 1945

Murder Was Done 'Legally' in 'Privileged' Nazi Camp

This is the concluding installment of Mrs. Spanjaard's story.

Bergen-Belsen was overrun last week by the British 2d Army.

By

MRS. ALFRED B. SPANJAARD

As told to JACK SHAFER

Our "privileged" position did not trouble our young SS guards very much. There was a large barbed wire fence around the camp. On the fence they had hung human skeletons with warnings printed underneath: "The Jew who dares to to come within 2 0 f e e t will be shot on the spot."

Every day the men were lined up at 5:30 a.m. on the *Appelplatz* for roll call. The SS guards used to take off the prisoners' caps and fling them to the fence, then order the men to fetch them. Refusal meant death, so the men obeyed. The guards in the towers, seeing the prisoners running toward the wire, would open fire and kill them.

The bodies of the victims would be placed on the paths around the camp and all the women and children would be forced to walk past the corpses 20 times and told: "See what happens to disobedient husbands."

The Nazis were very careful to see that things were done "legally." The men were starved to death "legally," and they were shot to death "legally." One SS guard who made the mistake of killing a Jewish boy during a drunken fit was punished. It was said he was shot. I don't know.

Branded

One day I learned what it meant to be in a "privileged" camp. Our camp was part of a huge circle of camps, each of which housed a different set of prisoners: political, Polish, Soviet, etc. In the camp adjoining ours there arrived one day 40 Dutch women. We spoke to them through the wire fence. They showed us the numbers the Nazis had branded on their arms and told us they had been shipped back from a camp in Poland. Why they had been spared they didn't know. They told us every one else in the Polish camp had been killed. The men had been burned in giant furnaces; the women, gassed.

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Our guards noticed us talking. Our whole camp of 4000 was penalized by being deprived of any food whatsoever for three days. Every night we would hear the screams of the 40 Dutch Jewesses as they were beaten. We would cover our ears to keep out the sound of their outcries: "God, Almighty, we're not doing anything, why do you beat us?"

We were the "privileged" prisoners. We were not beaten. Our guards merely favored us with their visits during which they would taunt us and spit in our faces. One guard asked me: "What are you here for?" I answered, "My son is an American citizen." The guard replied: "Oh, American Jews, Dutch Jews, Swiss Jews, they're all alike." Then he spat into my face.

'Must Die'

The day I came to Bergen-Belsen I had suffered a hemorrhage from an ulcerated stomach. I was put into the hospital ward, which was identical with the other barracks. However, patients were allowed to stay in bed most of the day (two in a bed) and didn't have to work. The first day the doctor came in and asked how I felt. "Very sick," I replied. "No wonder," he said. "Yesterday someone died in this bed. You'll never feel well in this bed. Anyway, sick people must die."

Our guards were great practical jokers. One of their favorite pastimes was ordering everyone out of a barracks and moving them into another barracks in the middle of the night. That meant taking all one's possessions in a few minutes' time and trudging with them from one end of the camp to another. Incidentally, we had no place to keep our possessions, so we kept them in our beds. Those who were fortunate enough to get nails hung their things from the side of the bunks.

The SS men had another game which only their perverted minds could think up. Once a month we were ordered deloused. We were sent to the showers in batches of 40—two women to a shower. We had to strip and put our clothes on a dumbwaiter which took them to the delousing room to be fumi-

K o p i e	
REGISTRATUR.	No. 3
Name: Spanjaard	
Vorname: Alfred B.	Bar.:
Geburtsdatum: 28.7.03	
Ihr Antrag vom 8.4.43	
Entscheidung:	
Ihr Gesuch ist dahingehend entschieden, dass Sie Ihre Ehefrau und Ihr Kind interniert werden.	
Datum: 17.5.43	
 Kontrolliert Abt. Disziplinierung	

This is the registration slip which the Spanjaards received at Westerbork camp promising that they would be interned. Instead, they were sent to Bergen-Belsen. The paper reads: "Your request is decided as follows, that you, and your wife, and your child will be interned."

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gated. The guards would send up young boys of 15 to the women's showers to carry the clothes to the dumbwaiter. They sent young girls of 15 to the men's shower to do the same.

The guards used to pick the prettiest girls for duty in the camp kitchen. Every night, on the pretext that they might be hiding food, the girls were ordered to strip in front of the guards. The girls were otherwise not molested. Remember, this was a "privileged" camp. The Nazis never let us forget it.

My husband was terribly afraid that I would die. I had lost 85 pounds. He would come into the ward and try to make me eat a piece of bread that he had cut from his "quota." I could not know that it was he who was dying. He collapsed one day and they brought him in to the hospital. That night our son came in. We had been moved in the middle of the night. He was almost crazed with hunger. And he was afraid for his father. He cried:

"Mother, let's kill ourselves. I can't stand it any longer."

It was a long time before I could quiet him.

On Jan. 21, 1945, a few weeks after my husband fell ill, I was called into the commandant's office at 7 a.m. Two high officers from Berlin were there. They had a list of 600 people from which they were to pick 300 for an exchange. One of them asked me: "Do you want to go back to America?" Afraid to appear too enthusiastic lest the "fun-loving" Nazis would send me back to the barracks, I merely said "All right."

At this the Nazi got angry and shouted: "If you don't want to go you don't have to." Quickly, I told him: "Yes, please, send me back to America, please."

"Be at the Appelplatz in 10 minutes," he ordered.

Alfred was too ill to be moved. He could not even sit up. He had no shoes. But we were at the Appelplatz in 10 minutes. When I told my husband the good news he told me not to worry about the baggage; we must get out. Somehow he got up—how I'll never know. On his feet we stuck slabs of wood and bound them with cord. And so a dying man walked three-quarters of an hour in the bitter cold to the station in Celle, for in Celle was liberty.

Changed

We were given first class accommodations in the train that was marked with the Red Cross. For the first time in years we had the luxury of heat.

A half hour later the Bergen-Belsen commandant with the two Nazi officers came through. I hardly recognized them because of their changed manner.

The commandant stopped at our side and with a great, big smile

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asked: "Alles gut hier? Alle zufrieden? Haben Sie einige Wunsche jetzt?"—"Everything OK? Are you satisfied? Do you wish for anything?"

We traveled for three days and nights. The second day my husband suffered dysentery. There was no water and I could not wash him until the train stopped for a short while en route. I ran out, filled my eating bowl with snow, stripped Alfred of his soiled clothes and washed him. I couldn't clean the clothes so he lay there naked, covered only with a worn, old overcoat.

My husband was too weak to sit up, but in Berlin we were greeted by a sight that made me lift him up to see. Every house in sight of the train had been knocked to pieces by bombs.

It was a gladdening sight, and my husband murmured: "I'm so thankful that I could live to see this."

Near Liebenau, Americans who had been interned there came aboard. When they saw us they were shocked. They showered us with food from their parcels. To everyone they gave cigarets.

The happiest moment for all of us came when we reached Constance, the Swiss took over, and the Nazis left. All at once we were besieged by Swiss boy scouts, Red Cross, YMCA and Salvation Army representatives who brought us cologne, books, cigarets, underwear and food. And Barry asked me:

"Mother, are there really good people left in the world?"

When the doctor saw Alfred he told me he would have to take him to the hospital in Munsterlingen, while the rest of us went on to the St. Gallen camp. He promised that we would be reunited on the boat. But two days later, on the morning that I had been promised by the Swiss camp commandant that I would visit my husband, orders came to go immediately to Marseille where the Gripsholm waited to take us aboard. We had to go or return to Germany.

That night I learned from the doctor and a rabbi who waited at the next station for me that my husband had died. He died alone.

I don't know where he is buried.

But I know that he is free.



"... in Berlin we were greeted by a sight that made me lift him up to see. Every house in sight of the train had been knocked to pieces by bombs."