

The liberation of Mauthausen, as recounted by Giuliano Pajetta

original Italian excerpt from his book "Mauthausen", published by Orazio Picardi in Milan 1946, translated by C Dimarco 2014



The curtain falls on the hell of Mauthausen

The outcome of the war had already been decided. In the early days of May, the Nazis began preparing to leave the camp. They had started to destroy the gas chambers, and to burn the camp archives – or at least they thought they had burnt the archives, since many of the vital registers had already been substituted for packets of scrap-paper by Spanish and Czech anti-fascists amongst the inmates. Before they left the camp, the Nazis didn't just kill people already slated for "Arrest" [the special prison used to murder prisoners involved in the camp resistance] and so the crematorium oven, but also many other prisoners who had worked in laboratories and work-battalions for the German war machine: the dead do not talk and they do not tell secrets.

The most criminal elements amongst the guards were officially freed and absorbed into the SS. The endless crimes committed by these professional criminals had made them into acceptable material for Himmler's organisation. On May 3, the camp was officially handed over to the fire brigade police in Vienna, but the SS was still close at hand to the camp, with the front-line now only 50 or 60km to the east. These were difficult hours in which the prisoners prepared to take control of the camp, and transform it from the most base illegality and persecution into a place where at least a minimum organisation could be created to provide for everyday needs, and to prevent a general catastrophe of arson, ransacking, chaos and disorder, as would have been the natural reaction on their liberation of thousands of men driven mad by hunger and horror.

On the afternoon of 5 May, a light American tank arrived at the camp. The police quickly hoisted the white flag and then disappeared, but not before being disarmed by our combat groups. A huge mass of men crying with emotion and joy poured into the large main square and high up into the control towers, which were already adorned with the national flags of the now-free prisoners, and improvised speeches led to the formation of the first anti-fascist committee at Mauthausen. But the American tank left, and for a day and a half, Mauthausen remained under the control of no-one, or to be more accurate, it became an independent anti-fascist republic thirty kilometres behind the Nazi front-line. The international Committee took control of the camp, putting an end to ransackings and the destruction, re-organised the supply of basic essentials, started providing first-aid to the sick, and organised its armed forces and police service. More than 1,500 armed men took up position outside the camp to prevent any possible return by the SS, who could have done to us what they did in many other camps that they had abandoned and then re-occupied two days later – that is, murder nearly all the prisoners.

Those guards who had not left the camp with the SS were put to death. Both the original and newly-absorbed SS members who were found hiding in nearby factories were forced from their foxholes and executed. When the main bulk of the US army arrived at Mauthausen, they found men who had already organised themselves, who had already created a national and international unity based on their common suffering under Nazism, and who wanted to tend the deep wounds it had carved in their flesh.