

## What I Experienced in St. Ottilien at the End of the War

### A documentary by nurse Erika Grube

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It is a well-known fact that an event at which many people were present is remembered and described differently by each eyewitness. So I am now searching my personal memories to see what images come to mind when I think of the chaotic and revolutionary time between 1944 and 1947.

At the end of 1944, I came from the bomb-damaged Munich Art Academy to what was then the St. Ottilien reserve hospital, as I had already completed training as a movement therapist. In the first days of May 1945, the military hospital was converted into a DP hospital by the Americans, where the surviving Jews from the labor and concentration camps were housed.

The first memory dates back to the last days of the war, when the American front was approaching from the west. Nobody knew when it would reach us, because the media controlled by the Nazi government had fallen silent – there was complete chaos.

Shortly before the Americans “conquered” St. Ottilien, a few emaciated figures were driven past the monastery grounds like cattle in the night and fog. They were Jewish concentration camp prisoners who were not to come under the eyes of the Americans and were herded towards the front by SS men in civilian clothes. One of the prisoners collapsed exhausted and, lying on the ground, was immediately shot and left lying there. The chief secretary, with whom I shared the room, witnessed this incident herself. I will never forget how she threw herself over her bed, crying in bewilderment.

Two days later, towards evening, I was working as usual in my treatment room upstairs in the monastery, called “Monastery Medico”. Suddenly a colleague said to me: “Hey, look outside, I think there’s a tank or something coming.” We leaned out of the arched window and wondered, because an American tank was crawling up the path behind the milk truck that brought the milk to the hospital every evening. It had to drive just as slowly as the milk truck, because the road is too narrow to overtake. It all happened in complete silence and didn’t seem like a heroic capture at all. It took a few more hours for everyone – doctors, staff, patients and the remaining members of the monastery – to realize that the end of the terrible war had arrived, but then the tears of joy and hope came. However, this joy was replaced the very next day by horror and pity when our liberators brought the surviving concentration camp prisoners to St. Ottilien.

As several witnesses told me, this happened as follows: At the train station in Schwabhausen, 4 km west of Geltendorf, a train with lots of sealed cattle wagons had been parked for days. The American airmen suspected it contained weapons and ammunition. In order to break any resistance before their troops entered, they carried out a low-flying attack on the train, as they did in many other places – unaware of what was inside. The Germans had had it driven eastwards in front of the front in order to conceal from the “enemy” the sight of the horribly emaciated prisoners, who had been hastily collected in several concentration camps and placed in these cattle wagons. The wagons were sealed and no one looked after them. Several prisoners had already died of hunger and thirst in them.

After the low-flying air raid, the country doctor<sup>1</sup> from Schwabhausen came to St. Ottilien and asked the head doctor, Oberfeldarzt Dr. Maier, to admit around 50 seriously injured people to the military hospital. But this doctor (apparently a man without compassion and intelligence) replied: “There is no room for Jews in a German military hospital.” Without his permission, however, some of the wounded were accommodated downstairs in the seminary at the instigation of other doctors.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Dr. Philipp Arnold (1885-1948) made this suggestion on behalf of Dr. Zalman Grinberg (see: Grinberg, Our Liberation from Dachau).

2 In the still unoccupied theatre room which was used for assemblies.

When the Americans arrived three days later, they heard about this and – particularly incensed by the chief physician’s response – they immediately made the whole of St. Ottilien their off-limits area, ordered the evacuation of the German patients and filled the military hospital with surviving prisoners from the concentration camps.

My colleague also remembers well how the young soldiers, including those who had just undergone surgery, the dying and the convalescing, were hurriedly pushed onto American army trucks on stretchers. There had been no time to prepare them for transportation, so they only had their hospital shirts on, open at the back and held together with ribbons. We quickly ran to get blankets and put them on them because it was a cold day. The evacuation was completed within a few hours and the trucks disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Gradually, more and more Jewish prisoners were brought to St. Ottilien. (Later, a Dr. Grinberg organized the further arrivals). When they arrived, most of us employees were paralyzed with horror, and many, including myself, spontaneously decided to stay and help where possible. Some, however, refused to work for Jews, whom they considered to be worthless sub-humans. Others were not given a new employment contract by the American administration – because of their brown past.

Never before had we seen people so emaciated and exhausted, and it was strange and shocking how they arrived. In the seventies there was an American movie “Holocaust”, which was supposed to describe the concentration camp experiences. Violent outbursts of despair, panic, tears and hugs were apparently supposed to make this movie realistic. But the people who came to us were completely different. They were burnt out inside, as if they could no longer feel. The inhuman physical and psychological suffering had killed their ability to express themselves, and only gradually did many, though not all, regain their ability to feel.

That was the emotional expression. The physical expression was almost worse. I can still see them today, every bone clearly visible under a strangely gray, dry skin. As a therapist, I also had to work with them in physical contact, and I’ll never forget what that felt like: the direct touch of bones under a shimmering skin.

At first, the former concentration camp prisoners said almost nothing. – There is probably a tragedy of experience that seems worse than dramatic events. It was this terrible, dark everyday life in the concentration camp. It was only from halting and disjointed statements that I was able to form a truthful picture and sketch the so-called “morning roll call” in the concentration camp. Every morning, the prisoners had to line up at 5 a.m., even in winter. They had nothing warm to wear. Most of them had diarrhea, but had to endure standing in line without being allowed to leave. The SS man taking roll call only appeared after a long wait, even hours. If someone collapsed, it was over for him. He was shot immediately. That was everyday life in a concentration camp!

Many Baltic Jews who had been in a concentration camp for six years, including many Polish Jews, came to the St. Ottilien DP hospital after being imprisoned for almost as long. They came from many different concentration camps; I often heard the names Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Dachau, Birkenau and Theresienstadt mentioned. There were also Hungarian Jews who had only been imprisoned shortly before the end of the war. They formed a special group with whom communication was particularly difficult because they only spoke Hungarian and not Yiddish like most of the others. Most of them were not denominational Jews, they had been taken by surprise by the SS on the basis of lists of residents.

It was striking that there was not a single child among these hundreds of people, nor a single married couple. Everyone had lost their relatives. Some had sewn a tiny photo of their loved ones into the hem of their striped jackets and thus saved them. They asked me for large charcoal drawings, which I made from the small photos.

It also seemed strange that they had no hatred for us Germans; on the contrary – they were very grateful for every bit of attention and help. Their hatred, on the other hand, was directed at the “capos”, who were chosen by the camp administration from their own ranks to supervise the camp. Some of these capos were notorious as denounciators who sent many prisoners to torture and death for their own gain. I remember that the military police had to pick up a capo from St. Ottilien again. Prisoners had recognized him and wanted to



Rehabilitation treatment by nurse Erika.

lynch him. It was very tragic that quite a few of the patients died in the first few days. This was not only due to epidemics of typhus, typhus and dysentery, but also to malnutrition and exhaustion: several German hospital doctors were taken to American prisoner-of-war camps as members of the German Wehrmacht; there were no Jewish doctors fit for work at the beginning.

However, these people, who had been malnourished for years, were in urgent need of a medically supervised diet at the beginning, but in this general chaos the warnings of the German doctors were not heeded. The American soldiers, overwhelmed with compassion at the sight of these half-starved people, gave them kilos of whole milk powder, butter and meat. But these people had not had an ounce of fat for years – neither margarine, nor oil, nor meat. They gorged themselves on it ravenously – and died. Most of them at night. Often a patient would say to us in the morning – “Pick up my neighbor; he’s lying dead next to me.” They lay on straw mats at the beginning. There weren’t enough beds.

I had my treatment room on the second floor of the seminar. One morning I arrived a little late. The assistants were already working on the two massage benches. The first was treating the stump of an amputee’s leg, the other was massaging a polyneuritis patient. All around stood and sat – waiting – many patients, still in their striped concentration camp jackets and pants. There was a stretcher on the floor across from the massage benches (two long sticks with a cloth covering between them), and a dead man was lying on it, undressed, his paper shirt folded across his chest. No one had had time to put it on him. The waiting patients paid no attention to him at all. When I asked them all to leave the room out of respect for the dead man, they looked at me in astonishment and said: “What does it matter, a dead man – dead people are always there.” When they had left, with the help of an assistant, I put the paper shirt on the dead man, who was already in



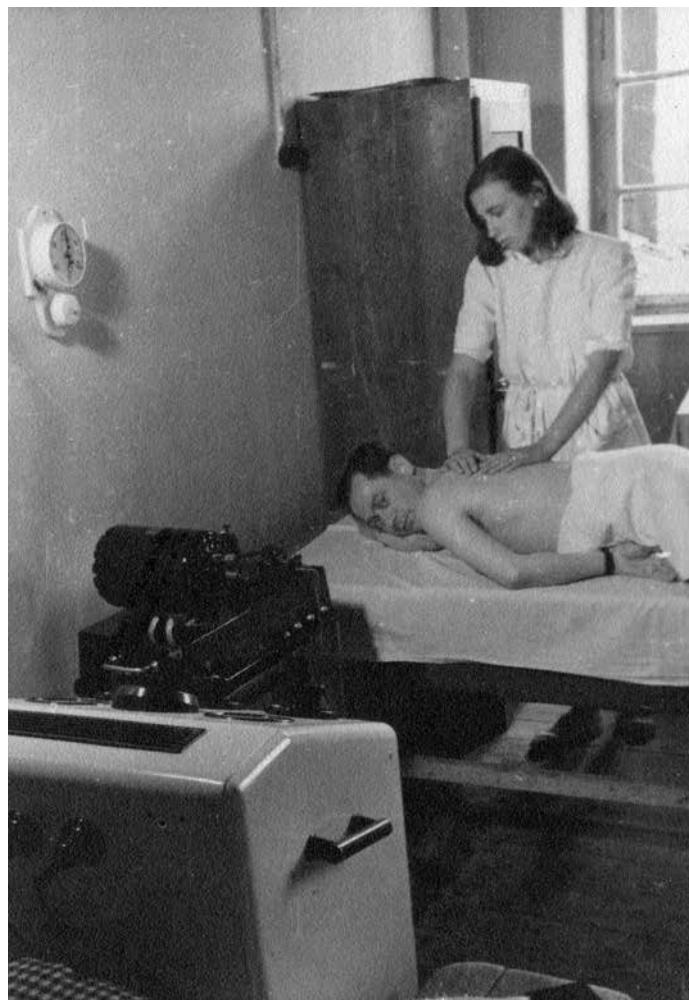
Drawings by Erika Grube: Jewish Cemetery at St. Ottilien, treatment of a patient (the nurse is herself).

rigor mortis. Then I searched the seminary for a nurse. When I finally found one and asked him to take the dead man out, he told me: “You’ll just have to wait; there were so many dead bodies this morning that we can’t take them away so quickly.” That same morning, I saw an old man lying on a stretcher in the hallway. I gave him water.

The dead were laid out in a secluded room downstairs in the seminary before being taken on a cart to the small, quickly improvised cemetery. The Jewish rite demands a quick burial, preferably on the same day or the next. A mass grave had been dug there. Initially, any other type of burial would have been completely impossible. Often nobody knew the names of the dead; some had already died on the train, some of the dying could no longer speak; and the nursing staff tried with all their might to give the living the help they needed. There was no one who had time to dig so many graves. Later, those whose names could still be found were given headstones, and those who died later were given individual graves, which can still be seen today. Today, this small cemetery – right next to the Catholic cemetery and opposite the train station – is a place of peace from which you have a wonderful view of the wide landscape.

The strange thing is that, despite everything, I remember this time as a time of new hopes and the dawning of brighter horizons. A feeling of liberation and emotion was also part of the atmosphere. In order to process the intense impressions through drawing, I observed the dying and the dead. The faces sometimes showed an agonizingly distorted expression in their death throes. It was all the more shocking to observe the transformation on the faces of the dead. I often thought I saw an expression of “having finally arrived”, of redemption and peace, as even the seriously ill and dying had been able to experience the feeling of being freed from the fear of violence here, and that was like a great sigh of relief.

St. Ottilien thus became a place of protection and help for the sick and dying, but also a place of new hope for the convalescent. Here they could find themselves again in peace, even though the deep-seated fear lingered for a long time. The doctors did not have an easy job, as linguistic communication was often very difficult. Polish, Russian, Estonian, Yiddish and Hungarian were spoken in confusion. Nobody could interpret Hungarian in particular at first. This made it difficult to make a diagnosis. There were also many rare diseases caused by extreme deficiency symptoms, such as polyneuritis, paralysis of all kinds, frostbite, which made amputations necessary, and last but not least the epidemics that quickly spread through the weakened bodies. These were one of the most frequent causes of death, alongside the many tragic deaths caused by



Drawing by Erika Grube: Giving water to a patient, Sr. Erika during treatment

sudden fatty eating. The patients had not been informed by anyone about the dangers of poor nutrition. In the nursery and in the orchards, they pounced on the long-lost fruit, some of which was still unripe, and fell ill or died as a result.

My boss was a Jewish surgeon who had run a hospital in Kovno before her imprisonment in a concentration camp.<sup>3</sup> She gave me Russian lessons and I gave her English lessons in exchange. One day she was called to a Hungarian patient who was writhing in severe pain. She was screaming and pointing to her stomach, which was distended like many starving people. As no one could interpret Hungarian, the doctor was at a loss – until the woman suddenly gave birth. Mother and child were later discharged in good health; they went to America in 1947.

I particularly remember the case of a 17-year-old boy. What a state he arrived in: emaciated to the bone, with his heels close to his buttocks. He couldn't stretch his legs out a centimeter, the tendons under his knee joints were shortened and bone-hard, medically known as "flexion contracture". This boy had contracted typhus in the concentration camp. Typhus sufferers were killed immediately. But he was lucky enough to be hidden in a coal cellar by a good Capo, between two piles of coal. There was hardly any space, only 1.20 m between them. He had to lie there for six weeks with his legs drawn up – too weak to move – until he was freed. After weeks of therapeutic work, I tried to carefully put him on his feet. It was like a miracle: he was able to walk again and was completely healthy.

I will never forget the first service that the patients held outside according to Jewish rites. They had not been allowed to perform their rites for many years, or even sing their songs; they were severely punished in

3 Dr. Riwa Kaplan-Molk.



Drawing by Erika Grube:  
Religious service at St. Ottilien.

all concentration camps. Now the Eastern Jews are very religious. Martin Buber and Friedrich Weinreb were well-known representatives of Hasidism, a deep religious wisdom of the Eastern Jews. For all orthodox Jews, the ban on practicing their chants and rites meant a spiritual oppression and humiliation that we can hardly imagine. A large crowd had gathered on the square in front of the seminary and in front of St. Florian's and on the path leading up to the winter school. Everyone wanted to be there – and so those who could not yet walk were dragged along on stretchers and in wheelchairs. Others were led or came with difficulty on crutches. Most of them still wore the striped concentration camp clothing. There were also rabbis among the patients. A prayer leader stood in front of the crowd with a white, square cloth on his shoulders; most of them had also put white cloths around their shoulders and covered their heads with concentration camp caps or hats. They swayed to the rhythm of their songs, and everyone sang to themselves with such fervent enthusiasm that we were deeply moved. Almost all of us who worked there were there, we carried the patients and helped where necessary. By this time, the abbot and several priests and brothers, some from the war, some from camps and other monasteries, had already returned home to St. Ottilien. I also saw them standing next to the crowd, and some of them had tears in their eyes. It was as if these songs went straight up to heaven as thanks to the Creator of us all.

I learned a tolerance back then that I had never known before. And it happened like this: The patients re-introduced their old familiar Shabbos customs as they were able. This meant that no activities were allowed from Friday evening onwards. They were no longer even allowed to fetch their own tea, and they were not even allowed to turn on the light switches – according to their beliefs, that would have been tantamount to starting a mechanical device. The sisters were either annoyed or laughed about it. Once, a sister had forgotten to switch off the ceiling light in the evening. The next morning she found the lamp wrapped in a cloth; none of the patients had wanted to turn the switch on, but they were allowed to use a cloth. For some of us, this may sound like a ridiculous anecdote. But before we laugh, we should think: how many of our customs that we have taken for granted since childhood may seem ridiculous to others? And further: What must these people have suffered if they were prevented from practising their millennia-old customs for years? And do we not also share with these people a respect and love for the same psalms and prophets from the Old Testa-



Left side: Dr. Riwa Kaplan Molk visiting a patient: right side: Survivors' Talmud of June 1946, printed in St. Ottilien.

ment that Jesus Christ often quoted in his sermons? For their part, they never scolded or laughed at us back then: they had gratitude and respect for us.

Over time, more and more patients became able to walk. The Polish Jews quickly began to trade again, according to their old custom. They had made little crates to hang around their necks and sold everything they could get here, especially through the Americans. They had shoelaces, oranges, cigarettes, safety pins, bars of soap, etc. to offer.

From 1946 onwards, the problem arose of where the patients who were fit for discharge could continue their lives. The Americans withdrew more and more from the administration and left it to the Jews. Among them, the Zionists emerged, who propagated emigration to Israel.

One day I was asked by the Jewish leadership to come to St. Florian's House. The political meetings took place there. As a graphic designer, I was asked to make posters, for example for Tel Aviv, with modern blocks of houses under a huge rising sun.<sup>4</sup> Tel Aviv was practically built out of the ground and was supposed to take in refugees and settle them in Israel. The Zionists eagerly campaigned for a national state of Israel. The main center of their ideas was established in St. Ottilien and the Munich area. It was necessary to campaign for emigration to Israel in particular. Almost everyone wanted to leave Germany, but Israel, which was still being established, had little appeal for them. Those who had relatives or friends in America or Australia preferred to go there. This was particularly true of the Baltic Jews. The emigration formalities took time. It took until 1948 before the monastery was able to use all of its buildings again.

4 This drawing has probably been used as part of the cover design of the "Survivors' Talmud".

Many things have changed in St. Ottilien in the forty years that have passed since then. On the site of today's asphalted parking lot, where visitors now arrive, there used to be an old inn. It was a real pilgrims' inn, with thick walls, low guest rooms and small chambers under the sloping roof on the second floor. The windows were tiny, the stairs narrow and winding, the floors had wide wooden planks. It was already over two hundred years old at the time. When the Americans occupied the monastery, they turned it into their "office" (administration center). We had to get passes there if we wanted to leave the monastery walls. In the first few months, however, even that was not allowed, we were practically prisoners.

The old pilgrims' guest room was now full of American officers who listened to music, drank and smoked. It was like a pigeon loft, as the UNRA had been in charge of the hospital since around 1946 and all business matters were conducted here. The dilapidated old building later had to be demolished. A new inn was built further out, as well as other buildings adjoining the winter school and the seminary. The basic building of the winter school with the beautiful baroque chapel of St. Ottilia remained unchanged. Not far from it was the "delousing station". We all had to pass through there during the typhus epidemic.

We could only enter the dark and mysterious monastery church from the monastery. The Gestapo had closed the outside doors. The first pontifical mass, which was celebrated by the returning Archabbot Chrysostomus Schmid, was a great event. The church was festively lit up again for the first time and the beautiful priestly vestments were brought out again. So many people attended that I could only find space in the gallery.

We were all filled with joy and hope for the future.